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ARTHLY FULFILMENT

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BY

JOHN REAY WATSON

AUTHOR OF "IN A MAN'S MIND."

COLONIAL EDITION

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MARGARET WATSON

Died 13th March, 1897

A Tribute to a Mother's Memory

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CONTENTS

	PAGE
GIVES A GLIMPSE OF LOVE'S AWAKENING	I
HINTS AT IMPENDING DEVELOPMENTS	17
DEALS SYMPATHETICALLY WITH THE UNCONSCIOUS	
POSE OF TWO WOMEN	30
MARKS A STEP OF PROGRESS	41
FEELS IN A STATE OF INDECISION	47
RECORDS A REACTION	55
IS SECRETLY IN SYMPATHY WITH A CHILD'S	
PROTEST	69
RECORDS THE SHABBIEST OF ADVENTURES . . .	86
ASSISTS AT THE PORTRAITURE OF A HERO . . .	101
BRINGS A REPENTANT LOVER TO HIS ALLEGIANCE .	118
MOVES IN THE CAUSE OF SISTERLY DUTY . . .	125
SEEKS THE AID OF A CHILD IN DEVELOPING THE	
STORY	137
II. NOTES THE EFFECT OF A REVISION OF CAUSE .	147
IV. SEES PASSION SUPREME OVER ALL	156
XV. DEALS WITH AN ERA OF REPENTANCE	161
XVI. INTRODUCES A DISCORDANT NOTE	189
VII. REJECTS AN OFFER OF HAPPINESS	205
VIII. RECOGNISES A DESTINED ISSUE	212
XIX. SEIZES THE OPPORTUNITY OF ESCAPING FROM IT .	217
XX. DEALS WITH REVERSED POSITIONS	230

CHAP.		
XXI.	REVIVES A DEAD PASSION.	are
XXII.	NOTES ITS PROGRESS AND FINAL EXTINCTION	and
XXIII.	PRESENTS THE INESCAPABLE BOND OF SISTER HOOD	heir
XXIV.	GIVES A GLIMPSE OF WOMANLY WRETCHEDNESS	are
XXV.	HALTS ON THE VERGE OF A CLIMAX	ion.
XXVI.	MAKES THE DISCOVERY THAT THE CLIMAX HAS MISSED FIRE	it, then
XXVII.	UNSUCCESSFULLY URGES ITS NECESSITY	ince,
XXVIII.	SATISFIES THE DESIRE FOR A VICTIM	rops a to evil- ried

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CHAPTER I

GIVES A GLIMPSE OF LOVE'S AWAKENING

TOWN of twelve thousand people, it lies to the north of the capital of the colony, the tall, blue hills circling it. The houses dotted over the hilly ground present a picturesque confusion. The harshly musical sound of mining machinery reveres through still air. A tramway runs over-head from each shaft; the mullock lies beneath. Steel ropes wind over whirling wheels in tireless fury. A laden truck comes up from a thousand feet below; an empty one is moved on the cage. In sharp contrast are weather-worn derricks—ghost-like sentries of abandoned claims; falling or in whims—pathetic evidence of futile industry; dead shafts, many of them belonging to history, most of them deserving of epitaphs. The crushing mills with their measured motion are ceaselessly present, and the noise of their impers comes to be as pleasing as the ocean sound. There are fields of moist sand, and flumes which giant stride traversing them, emptying each its

AN EARTHLY FULFILMENT

burden in a splashing stream. The creeks are choked with sand; the river bed is sand; and flood water carries sand across the flats.

The miners live within sight and sound of their work, in houses old and unsightly. Gardens are few; the soil does not lend itself to cultivation. But little evidence of leisure of life, or love for it, is presented. Yet children are born here, and men die; life opens and closes on tones of grey.

The business part of the town lies at a distance, the one street of it winding tortuously. The shops are small and mean; their windows invite you to uninviting purchase. Hotels are many and evil-smelling. Dust lies deep in the street, or is carried in a thick cloud by the wind.

From the top of the town a road takes its level way round to the railway station. The houses here are more imposing; affluence or its similitude has chosen this quarter. Gardens are sweetly odorous; the outlook is attractive, though small and unambitious.

Minnie Turner coming from her home on Red Hill felt tired with her walk. She passed in at a gate, and stood a moment admiring the flowers.

She was a girl of much outward attractiveness, one who under sufficient advantages might look piquantly pretty. Her face showed force and strength of character, but her features were sharp and not wholly regular. Her complexion, hinting at olive, was matched by an abundance of black hair of a rich softness of colour. In appearance she was older than her twenty years.

When the servant answered her ring, she went

into the drawing-room to wait. Her visit was an idle one, the outward excuse of it the returning of a book. Mrs Clarke and she were old friends, chiefly from the fact that they had long been fellow-teachers at the Presbyterian Sunday-School. Of character resemblance they had little; indeed, they were sharply conscious of each other's deficiencies. But circumstances had stood them side by side, and they each accepted with animation what was commendable in the other. Yet Minnie was openly aware that she had the more to gain from their friendship. Mrs Clarke had full social acceptance in the town, and the girl, imbued with petty ambitions, was willing to gain some advance of footing through her. She was of sufficient insincerity to accept the patronage of one whom she felt to be intellectually beneath her.

Her father was a mining manager, which fact defined the standing of the society to which she had been limited. She had little more than a bowing acquaintance with the people who constituted the select circle of the town. Lucky miners of most deficient education, and their wives, were the most notable element of that community, their position being assured in the power to entertain. She had qualities that exalted her above them if not the attributes that made her their equal, and so was not wholly without some recognition of the pettiness of her desire to share in their joyous existence. She had a vague complaint against her father that he had not reached to the position in the world to which his worth entitled him. That he had not done so was a

sin no less against himself than against her. But for the rest she had a pride in him that was more than filial.

Mrs Clarke came into the room. She was tall, of delicate figure, with a pale complexion, and harshly red hair. She was a widow, thirty-two years old, and kept house for two unmarried brothers of her late husband.

She had been left at his death with only sufficient means to purchase a small annuity. In his bachelor days he had been worth money, but had spent it in a wild way. Not till the last of it was almost gone did he think it time to repent; but the sincerity of his repentance was no longer in question when he married Miss Davidson, a lady whose chief virtue was the very negative one of being without faults. But his reformation came too late. He died in the third year of his marriage, and left his widow with one child. His brothers, who were possessed of moderate means from their father's estate, asked her to take charge of their house, and she acceded to the request.

She was a woman of meagre mind, of shallow opinions deeply embedded, yet of simple sincerity. Living within a round of petty church functions, she shaped her course by her moral sense. Her effort was towards good, though her accomplishment was small; her outlook on life was one of narrow intolerance.

“Well, Minnie, how are you?” she said.

“Quite well. I have brought your book back,” said the girl.

“But do take a chair, and give me your hat. I'll put it away.”

"I can't stay, Mrs Clarke—at least not very long. Mother was out when I came."

"You must stop for dinner. She must be left to guess where you are."

"It will be intruding too much upon you," Minnie murmured.

"Come, no denial! Give me your hat."

Minnie, bareheaded, looked homely and younger. She inspected the photographs in the frames on the table. The aggressively self-satisfied aspect that each presented amused her, and she wondered if it were only to her own eyes that the men looked vainer than the women. She took up one and looked closely at it, and her blood tingled. She shrank in some alarm from the thought that struck at her heart. She had had no previous warning, and it seemed impossible that in one sudden moment it could be true. She felt guilty of some unnamed treason when Mrs Clarke appeared.

They went out on the veranda to breathe a freer air, Mrs Clarke taking her work-basket with her. Minnie voiced her admiration for the charm of the garden.

"Fred has been giving it a good deal of attention," Mrs Clarke explained. "It has grown to be quite a craze of his since the failure of the firm he was with."

"It is a good thing to keep himself occupied. I suppose he will have a difficulty in finding a situation to suit him, times are so dull here."

"He must be patient, though it frets him having nothing to do. He wants to be off to Sydney to look round. But I won't let him go. He can afford to wait."

"It would be a mistake to leave Gympie after all these years," said Minnie.

Two little girls came running up the path. The elder of them, a girl of eleven, was Mrs Clarke's daughter. She had her mother's hair and complexion, and large, staring eyes that looked out unafraid on the world. Her visible defects were piteously accentuated by the contrast of the younger child's shy blue eyes and light, frizzy hair.

"Well, Maud, is school out?" asked Minnie.

The child nodded, and, taking off her hat, went up to her mother to be kissed.

"Come up, Ethel," said Minnie to the younger one, who was standing at the foot of the steps. "Come, dear, and tell me all about yourself—all that has happened since I saw you last."

"I am quite well," said the child timidly.

"I knew you were. And now shake hands with Mrs Clarke. I'll hold your books; I want to look at your exercise."

"Ma, me and Ethel want to dress my new doll," exclaimed Maud impetuously. "I needn't practise till to-night, need I?"

"It would be best to get it over before dark," said the mother. Maud looked saddened, and Ethel's eyes questioned Mrs Clarke in a pleading, childish way. "Well, as you have brought Ethel you can leave it for this once. But put your books away carefully—Ethel's also, so that she can get them when she wants to go home."

Maud nodded a full comprehension, and the children ran through the passage.

"She is a sweet little thing, that Ethel Hunter,"

GLIMPSE OF LOVE'S AWAKENING

said Mrs Clarke. "I like Maud to bring her here to play with."

"I am very fond of her—such a dear little child!" said Minnie. "She is in my class at Sunday-school. But her mother has been ill lately, I heard. Influenza, I think they said."

"Yes, she was very ill for a time. She is not strong. But she is about again now. She has given up her class at Sunday-school. I tried to persuade her to keep on. I think the doctor must have objected—raised some objection—though she didn't say so."

"It is a pity!" She added musingly: "I don't know much of him. Indeed, I don't know her more than to speak to at teachers' meetings and socials and that kind of thing, and I have never met him. He is not our doctor, and he so seldom goes out. Yet he seems very nice. People speak well of him—that is, for the most part."

"I find him nice. He has always been so to me. But I think him too reserved, too wrapt up in himself; and she seems by her manner to be becoming something like him. As if she were modelling herself after him—unconsciously, you know. You hear of such things in wives. 'The weaker vessel!'" She sighed more for herself than for the world's wives.

"'The weaker vessel?'" said the girl echoingly, and partly in derision. But quite without her will her mind seemed to shrink to a general, though hazy, acknowledgment of the inner truth of the sentiment.

"I am sure she must be tired of such a close life," Mrs Clarke continued. "I have tried to

get her to go about more. She wanted to refuse to come to the teachers' picnic on Tuesday, but I wouldn't have that."

The arrival of Fred—Mrs Clarke's younger brother-in-law—was a partly acceptable intrusion. He was fair complexioned and fair haired, and in years looked about twenty-four. His face and movement of body seemed to insist on a stolidness far in excess of what association with him revealed. His good-nature had so often responded to the calls made on it as to overshadow the more individual notes of his character.

"You are looking well," he said to Minnie in greeting.

"I am glad you think so, Fred," she answered. "But I want to talk to you; I have been hearing very bad news about you."

"But you have not believed it, Minnie. If it were very bad I am sure you couldn't."

"Well, Mrs Clarke was telling me that you were talking of leaving Gympie, and things like that. Isn't that so?"

"And what if it is?"

"But I have explained that I am not going to let you go, Fred?" Mrs Clarke interposed.

"And if she were willing to let you, Fred, you would still have me to reckon with," said Minnie.

"Why, if that is the case, I'll have to re-consider it all," he exclaimed.

She was carried to some confusion in the sudden feeling that his smile seemed to invest the echo of his words with an alarming sincerity.

"How are your sisters, Minnie?" asked Mrs Clarke after Fred had gone inside to write a letter.

"I never hear now. It seems so long since we were all at school together."

"Bella is in Sydney still ; she has a family of three to look after besides her husband. Poor Bella ! Yet she is very happy. I don't know why I pity her—pretend to, that is. There is no reason. Unless in remembrance—oh, I don't know." She added impatiently : "It is only that life itself is so small in comparison with one's dreams."

"It is dreams that make us dissatisfied with life," said the widow sententiously.

The girl looked at her, wondering if the sentiment were borrowed or original. It was the difficulty of deciding that point that seemed to give her a feeling of depression. She said wearily : "Bella wants me to go down on a visit. It is more than likely that I shall go—before very long. They are very comfortable down there. Mr Ferguson's business has improved."

"I am glad to hear it. But I used to know more of Edith than Bella. Is she in Townsville still?"

"Yes, still there. She has two children, a boy and a girl. Bella's are all boys. That is rather a pity!" The vagrant thought that she had found the real reason why she pitied Bella crossed her mind, but she did not utter it. "Edith wants mother to go up to see her ; she says she can't come down. But isn't it strange how far a family gets scattered ? I mean more than mere distance. Other ties, and that sort of thing. The sisters one has grown up with are in a few years almost outside one's existence."

"It is the way of the world. A sad way, perhaps." Her resignation was sincere; it was the girl's misfortune that she should see it as directed chiefly to other people's troubles.

Her animated voice embodied a protest of even the shadow of patronage. "Well, it is a sad world, but it will need a bigger world than this to sadden me."

Mrs Clarke nodded a gentle, repudiating negative, and sighed.

"My turn to come?" said the girl in exaggerated enquiry. "Let it."

"You are young yet, Minnie," said Mrs Clarke. She went into the house to put away her sewing as it had become too dark to work.

The girl rose from her chair, and stood fingering a cord of the veranda blinds. She had the thought that she was here looking out on life before being caught in its whirlpool. It was an old thought, new now only in that it embodied a warning.

Mrs Clark came back, the girl felt that her return was an intrusion. In escaping from the injustice of that belief she saw that some reparation was due to the woman. The immediate fancy that youth excused from that obligation was not the less convincing that it was consciously illogical. It was a laughing thought that told her it was a strange world that found room for such a queer nature.

"Let us go into the garden," said Mrs Clarke. "I'll pick you some flowers before it gets too dark."

"But I don't want you to rob the garden, Mrs Clarke."

"There are flowers enough; we ought to be able

to get a nice bunch. The chrysanthemums are the best we have had so far."

"I am passionately fond of flowers. I think most women are."

"I could never feel sure of the woman who was not."

"Nor I," answered the girl. But she blushed in feeling that she had subscribed to a very childish sentiment.

"We shall have fine weather for the picnic," said Mrs Clarke at a pause.

"Yes, we are almost sure to. I suppose both Mr Clarkes will be going?"

"Fred will, of course, but I don't know about Haddie. He got an invitation, but he says he won't go."

"I don't suppose there would be much enjoyment in it for him."

"Why, it will be the same for him as for others."

Minnie ventured a negative "Yes."

"Here are the children," said Mrs Clarke. "Did you dress the doll, dears?"

"Yes, but it is not a nice dress," said Maud. "Minnie, will you make me one?"

"I will try. You must let me measure the doll, and I'll bring the dress next time I come. Will that do? What size is the doll?"

"That big."

"Why, it is almost as big as Ethel, then."

The child was laughingly repudiative. "It is not near as big as me."

"Well, it will grow as big," Minnie protested.

"I am going to grow as big as muma, and a dolly can't grow," said Ethel.

"You like flowers, don't you, dear?" said Mrs Clarke to her.

"Yes, Mrs Clarke."

"Well, here is a bunch for you. Kiss me for them. You are going to be very pretty, child."

"I am going to see you home, Ethel, as it is getting dark," said Minnie.

They had not gone far down the road before the child noted two figures approaching from the opposite direction. "Here is my dada now," she said. "And that is Mr Clarke with him, too."

Minnie was in doubt whether to return or wait for Haddie. It seemed to her that it was without arriving at a conclusion that she stood when they reached the gate.

"Thank you, Miss Turner," said Hunter as he came up. Clarke murmured an introduction, and they shook hands.

"I just came down with her from Mrs Clarke's," said Minnie.

"And who gave you the pretty flowers?" he asked of his daughter.

"Mrs Clarke did, dada."

"It was very good of her."

"Every one likes to be good to Ethel, I think," said Minnie.

"I wish they would like to be good to me," said Clarke, in pretended mournfulness.

"It would be too dangerous. Don't you think so, Miss Turner?" said Hunter.

"Yes, indeed." The girl looked frankly up, rested her eyes a moment, and suddenly in confusion withdrew her glance. A silence gave her time to deepen her sense of guilt.

"Well, Minnie, how are you behaving these days?" asked Haddie, as they turned up the street, after parting from the father and daughter.

"The same as I always do, I think."

"I am afraid there isn't much satisfaction for me in that."

"But there is no need to be so candid about it."

"My dear girl, I was expressing my mournful regret."

They were old friends, but he was vaguely conscious here of an element that denied the existence of familiarity between them. He recognised the foolishness of the fancy, and made a definite attempt to ignore it. "I say, Minnie, what did you mean by looking at Mr Hunter in the way you did?" he asked suddenly.

"In the way I did! I don't understand you," she said in soft alarm.

He saw the danger of going forward, but shrank from the weakness of going back. "Well, as if you had the right to look at him in any way you like. As if he were your——" He saw the colour leave her face, and her lips tighten. "As if he were your dearest friend, I was going to say," he ended.

Their eyes met; hers showed an enquiring disbelief, his a searching scrutiny. He laughed out, as if in the effort to rid himself of some uncertainty.

"You seem to have become a quite different girl, Minnie."

"I just said I was the same."

He felt that his offence had touched some feminine depth, and was anxious to assert his

comparative innocence. "But you are not," he answered.

"Where am I different?"

"In your readiness to take offence."

"Oh, indeed!"

"You have admitted the charge?"

"Not in the least."

"I wish you would."

"I am sure you do."

He saw that he would have to stoop. "Come, forgive me, Minnie. I didn't mean to say anything at which you could be offended. I was only quizzing you."

"I know you were, and that is why. Let us talk of something else. Are you going to the picnic?"

"Yes, of course. Are you?"

She laughingly faced him; his affirmative in her mind had been given but to propitiate her. "Mrs Clarke told me you were not going."

"You will take my word against hers."

"But are you sure you will go?"

"Quite sure."

"You will find it very dull."

"Are you going?"

"I suppose I must."

Her pretended indifference to the compliment he had offered helped him to feel on old terms with her. "You haven't forgiven me yet," he said.

"Oh, don't go back to that again," she answered impatiently. Facing that revelation of her bad temper she felt she must justify it. "You wouldn't dare to with any one but me. You would not dare to have said in the first place. It is because I have always been so shockingly

forward that every one thinks he can say what he likes to me."

"Minnie!" he protested.

She answered his gaze with uncertain eyes, but she was courageous enough to try her voice. "Well?"

"Am I one of those who think they can say what they like to you?"

"You can include yourself."

"But I refuse. What I want to know is, do you include me there?"

"Let us talk of something else."

He was wise enough to take her evasion as a sufficient surrender. "I am quite agreeable."

"Why don't you begin?" she said at a pause.

"I was waiting for you."

"Mrs Clarke was saying that Mrs Hunter has been ill."

"Yes, she has been getting about again only the last few days. She is an exceedingly attractive little woman." It was in the knowledge that any extravagant utterance would be excused by her in the desire to escape from silence that he became aware that he had said a little more than was really necessary.

"I don't know her well," she answered.

"That is a loss to you both, I think."

They came to the gate and stood a moment, the softness of the calm winter evening idly soothing their senses. Darkness was enveloping the town; gas lamps in the distance shone faintly. Clarke stooped to pick a flower at the hedge, and Minnie, passing through the gate, turned and shut it upon him. "Say you have forgiven me my bad

temper," she said with a smile, as she stood facing him.

He felt a gladsome surprise, and answered in the wish to prolong it: "But I haven't forgiven it."

"You can't come in till you do."

He caught her wrists, and attempted to draw her towards him, but she broke from his grasp and ran up the path. At the steps she stumbled and fell forward, and he lifted her in his arms and held her. She read his eyes, and put out a hand to shield her lips from a kiss. She felt the shame of her position—and the throbbing joy of it; then a hate of him as she saw Fred standing in the doorway.

CHAPTER II

HINTS AT IMPENDING DEVELOPMENTS

IT was eight o'clock in the evening, the moon was faintly visible, but the stars were shut out by clouds. Rain had been falling out on the hills since the morning, and now a fresh wind seemed to carry a threat of its approach. The trees rustled in the breeze, dead leaves whirled aloft, and fell circling to the earth.

Ethel was waiting on the veranda for her father, and she called to him as he entered the gate.

"What is my little girl doing out here?" he asked as he took her hand.

"I was waiting for you, dada."

"But I expected to find you in bed."

"Muma said I could sit up till you came back."

"Where is your muma?"

"She is in the dining-room reading a book."

The hall was dark, but a light streamed out from the parlour. They went in there and saw Mrs Hunter lying on the couch. Ethel went round to her mother, but there was no movement from her other than a laboured breathing. Hunter was quickly beside her, even before the child's piteous outcry reached him.

"She has fainted, Ethel. Get a glass of water. Don't be frightened ; she will soon be better."

Mrs Hunter turned to him with an effort, opening her eyes in dull speech, but she sank back again. He took her head on his arm, and knelt beside the couch. She rested uneasily there, sighing wearily, she fingered a band of ribbon at her throat ; he untied it, and loosened her dress. She at length opened intelligible eyes to him, and smiled feebly.

"What is the matter, Kate ? "

She attempted to sit up, and took the water that Ethel brought her.

He took the glass from her, and sat on a chair in front of her. "Better now, Kate ? " he questioned.

Her luminous eyes showed a little impatience. "It was nothing. I don't know what is coming over me."

"We must find out. Tell me how it happened —how it came on."

"I wasn't really unconscious, Edgar. I heard you come into the room, and I heard you send Ethel for the water. I suppose I fainted. I have felt queer for a day or two."

"You have not been looking well, Kate. You are getting thin, dear," he said, taking a hand in his own. "Does your head swim ? "

"Not now. But that was how it came on. I was reading at the table, and then suddenly I grew giddy. I thought it would pass off, but whenever I looked at the book it came back. It was such a curious feeling," she added, attempting a laugh. She knew he was watching her closely ;

she put her hand to her face to lessen a pain at her eyes. "Then I came on the couch—and went off."

"We will have to take more care of you, Kate. You have quite frightened Ethel."

"Yes, muma, you did frighten me," said the child, with a pretended reproach that was partly sincere. "You mustn't do it again."

The mother put her arms round her, kissing her forehead. "Not again, Ethel."

"Do you feel weak?" asked her husband.

"Yes," she answered, shading a sense of complaint in softness of tone.

"You must be looked after better. But I don't think that I ever knew you faint before. Is this the first time that you remember?"

"No, not the first." She hoped that the faintness of the negative would mislead him, but his mind was too alert.

"Not lately, then?" he asked.

She looked blankly before her with expressionless eyes, but she would not stoop to definitely deceive him.

"Kate?" he questioned in a patient tone.

"The other day—two days ago, I think," she answered slowly and clearly.

"You told me nothing about it," he said in a quick sense of injury.

She looked with full eyes at him, and spoke in a pretence of weariness. "I didn't want to bother any one. It was when you were out, and Ethel was at school. I didn't mind it. It used to be quite a common thing when I was about fifteen.

I thought I had outgrown them. But there is nothing to be afraid of."

"Perhaps not, but still——" he rose from his chair. "You are not strong; I will have to see to some medicine for you. I am sorry you did not see fit to tell me before. I suppose I would have known nothing about this one either if I had not been here."

"I did not want to trouble you, Edgar," she said, with an aggressive pettishness.

"What a reason!" he said laughingly, unconvinced of its sufficiency and its sincerity.

There was the sound of a knock at the door, and Ethel eagerly took the responsibility of attending it. She returned in a moment accompanied by Haddie Clarke.

He was tall, with a firmness of carriage, and could fairly claim to be good-looking. His eyes had a fervour and a depth, and his lips curved in soft outline. He had fair hair and a slight moustache, and scarcely looked his twenty-nine years.

Mrs Hunter rose to meet him. "You are a stranger," she said.

"You can go to bed now, Ethel," said her father.

She looked at the clock, then kissed her mother "good-night." "You are not going to be sick again," she said, with cheek resting against her face.

"No, dear, never again. Say 'good-night' to Mr Clarke and dada, and run to bed."

"Ethel is more obedient than our tomboy," said Clarke to the mother when the child was gone.

"Maud, you mean? Is she troublesome?"

"Sometimes it takes the whole house to put her to bed ; she likes to argue the point."

"She is full of animal spirits. I confess I would like to see you putting her to bed."

"Oh, I never actually assist—at least not in the labour, only in the argument."

"I can fancy the scene. Poor Maud ! I suppose she has always to give in."

"Well, I can only answer for the times when I am there," he said with a smile.

"I am afraid you are not fond of children, Mr Clarke."

"I like well-behaved ones, at any rate."

"That is not much in your favour."

"I suppose it isn't. But I am forgetting what I came for. Mrs Clarke was coming over herself but she has visitors. There is a cookery book she says you promised to lend her."

"Yes, I'll get it at once. But you are not in a hurry to go ?"

"By-the-by you are not likely to be troubled again by that burglar, Mrs Hunter," he said when she returned. "They arrested him this afternoon."

"I am so glad. But who is he ?" she cried in animation.

"I didn't hear anything about it," said Hunter. "When was he arrested ?"

"At about six this evening. I was talking to the sergeant when they brought him in. He is a Frenchman ; talks good English ; middle-aged man, of powerful build. He has been living in an empty house on the Red Hill. It was a simple way they got him, too. He broke into a house on the South Side last night, but left behind him

a short stick that the police identified without any trouble."

"I am so glad they have got him," said Mrs Hunter. "I hope he will get a severe sentence. He deserves it—frightening women and children. I was never so thoroughly afraid in my life as when I woke up and heard him moving about in this room."

"It is about time he was caught," said Hunter. "He must have broken into quite a dozen houses by now."

"About that," answered Clarke. "It was rather a nasty experience for Mrs Hunter, but it had its humorous aspect, too."

"I don't wish to go through anything like it again," said Mrs Hunter stiffly.

"I should think not," said Clarke, reaching to an apologetic tone. "But still it must have been funny—that is, from the burglar's point of view—to see you, and Ethel, and the servant running up to our place at two o'clock in the morning."

"Well, what else could we do?" said Mrs Hunter forgivingly. "I wasn't going to stay in the house when he might be anywhere in hiding. He must have known that Edgar was away. He must have been used to Gympie, and must have known the people pretty well."

"He has been here for years. Do you know him, Hunter? He lived by himself in a small,umble-down house near the Presbyterian Church. He is not foreign-looking, though he is French ; carpenter by trade."

"I can't say that I know him, or even that I have eard of him. Is he an old hand at the business?"

"The police say he is from New Caledonia. I think it probable; at any rate he is a bit clever with his hands. Look at this!"

Mrs Hunter rose to see it—a small ivory trinket with the figure of a woman carved on it.

"It is well done," said Hunter, giving it to his wife to examine.

"He didn't care about letting me have it," said Clarke. "But I wanted it, and the sergeant was willing to oblige me."

"It is very pretty," said Mrs Hunter. "What are you going to do with it?" she asked, handing it back to him.

"Wear it on my watch-chain," he said humorously.

"Will you really? Fancy wearing a thing that was made by criminal hands!"

"Women are made up of sentiment," he answered.

"You ought to give it to me as a memento of my unlucky experience with a burglar." She caught a look from her husband, significant of his dissent from her request, but she preferred to ignore it.

"I wouldn't like you to have a memento of such an unlucky incident," Clarke answered. "And in any case—"

"I knew you wouldn't part with it," she said. "I wanted to see how far you really valued it. I think you look on the man as a kind of hero."

"Do you?" he said, revealing his sense of injury in aggressive surprise. "What an opinion you must have of me!"

"Of course, I know you want it only as a

curiosity," she murmured. "Indeed, that is what I meant to say."

"I don't want it for any tangible reason at all," he said, in confused explanation. "I don't know what made me ask the sergeant for it."

"Oh, if that is the case, I wish you would dispose of it, Mr Clarke. I don't like to think that you are going to always remember my only encounter with a burglar."

"You have nothing to be ashamed of in connection with it."

"Oh no, but still—well, I am very glad he is caught. I shall feel less nervous now when Edgar is away."

Clarke rose to go, and Mrs Hunter went with him as far as the veranda. "I hear you are going to the picnic to-morrow," she said with a smile.

"I think I shall drive down in the afternoon."

"Mrs Clarke told me in the first place that you were not going."

"I have changed my mind, you see?"

"You had some one to help you, surely?"

He coloured deeply; the thought that it might be generally known that Minnie Turner was responsible, and that an extravagant significance was being placed upon that fact, disconcerted him a little. He had a prompting to give her the facts, but shrank from the difficulty. He looked up and met her eyes; it was as if quite at variance with his line of thought that a sense of their power shot through his blood. He turned from her in his confusion, and, taking the ivory trinket from his pocket, played with it in an unheeding way.

She smiled at his embarrassment, and guessed

that there was something for her to hear. In the wish to precipitate it, she caught the trinket from his hand.

Her action startled him to wakefulness, and he caught her hand. In the frightened consciousness of where an impulse threatened to hurry him, he, in protest against it, smiled up at her, as if at their mutual triviality.

“Do you really want it?” he asked. His voice quivered, and he wondered if she could name the reason.

She would not answer, and in the purpose of compelling her, he pressed her hand gradually till she winced. A sense of the wrongfulness of their conduct was far more present in him than in her, but he felt her pretence of tranquillity was a challenge. “You won’t let go?” he said, and kissed her hand.

She straightened herself at the shock, and the ivory dropped to her feet. He stooped for it, and on looking up saw a set face, and eyes that ignored him. He waited for some condemnation—some expression of her anger.

“Good-night,” he said at length. His voice quavered a little, and that outward evidence of his loss of confidence angered him, dismayed him, conquered him. He felt a wave of weak repentance sweep over him. From the pathway he looked back to where she still stood immovable. “Good-night, Mrs Hunter,” he said.

The thought of how little it was after all, and—with no consciousness of incongruity—of how much she was to blame, flooded her. “Good-night,” she answered, and went inside.

"Mr Clarke is going to the picnic to-morrow," she said to her husband. He is going to drive down in the afternoon; perhaps you could come then as well."

"I can't, Kate."

It was not until he was entering on explanation that he felt her silent acceptance of the statement was a feminine disbelief in it. "For one thing, I have to be at the station to see if mother comes. She seems to have made a mistake in the day."

"I thought she was coming on Wednesday."

"So I thought at first. But she dates her letter, Friday, 24th, and says she will come on the 28th—not naming the day of the week. Well, Friday was the 23rd, so that her 28th may mean Tuesday, and not Wednesday."

"How could she make such a mistake?" said his wife, in faint despair.

"It is too late to wire to-night. We could in the morning, but she will have started then if she is coming. The train will be in almost as soon as we could get a reply, so that I shall have to be there to see if she arrives."

"I suppose there is no doubt about that," she said, "but—it is very awkward."

"I feel that it is quite my fault for not noticing the mistake sooner. I saw it quite accidentally."

"For my own part, I think she means Wednesday. It was silly not to name the day, as well as the date."

"Unfortunate," was his version of it. "But it need not spoil your day, Kate," he continued. "Ethel can come to the station with me; I will explain the matter to mother."

"Ethel has been looking forward to the picnic," she said faintly.

He permitted himself to answer: "She has also been looking forward to her grandmother's arrival."

She looked up at him with mild eyes, as if unable to believe that he had tried to be offensive. "I had better stay at home, too. I don't care in the least about the picnic. Except for my promise to Mrs Clarke, I would not have thought of going."

"There is no reason why you should not go. I hate to think of your being kept from it, when, after all, she may not come."

"If Ethel were coming—but of course that is impossible. Though I am confident Mrs Hunter won't come until Wednesday."

"It is unfortunate for Ethel."

"Oh, for us all."

"But you will go, Kate?"

"I really do not know."

He saw her mood of doubt as intended to annoy him, yet dared not protest, from the fear of goading her to a vain sacrifice of herself. "You can decide in the morning, then," he said. He was sensible of the irony of his tone, and in shame at it woke to a penitent consciousness of the barrenness of the issues she had to decide.

"There is plenty of time," she murmured. She looked studiously at her hand, and began rubbing with her handkerchief where Clarke had kissed it. "I don't want to go without Ethel," she said at length. She gave him a small silence in which to answer, but he could not be moved. "And I

know Mrs Hunter won't come to-morrow." She rose from her couch and went to the door.

"What is the matter with your hand?" he asked.

She stopped before him; the thought of seeing him arrive at a wrong conclusion amused her. "I don't know," she said doubtfully. "Something may have stung me."

He took her hand as she held it out to him across the table. "It seems a little inflamed. Is it painful?"

"Not in the least; it is not worth thinking over."

"It can scarcely be a sting, judging by appearances," he murmured. "It would be more swollen."

"It is only an itching feeling." She looked calmly into his eyes as she added: "I can't think what gave it to me."

He wondered what made her show such concern in a thing so much less than her fainting fits. He was generous enough to decide that neither was of much disquiet to her, but her conduct here was a plea for pardon for her previous silence on the state of her health.

She had been in her room but a moment when she heard the murmur of Ethel talking in her sleep. She went to her in the next room and stood by the bed, putting the clothes carefully about the child. She stooped and kissed her, and as she was leaving the room a startled sob came from her in a sudden sense of how far she had been debased by Clarke.

As she went out she met her husband. "I have just left a tonic for you on your table," he said. "You will take it regularly, Kate?"

HINTS AT IMPENDING DEVELOPMENTS 29

“ I don’t need it ; but of course if you wish——”

“ You will be better for it. And you won’t omit to tell me if you have another touch of that faintness ? ” His tone was tentative ; he seemed as if wholly doubtful of her mood.

She gave him a smiling negative, significant of her happiness in knowing that he took so much thought of her. “ Have you anything that will remove stains ? —ink stains, and that kind of thing , ” she asked.

“ Yes, I’ll get you some acid ; and perhaps I had better give you something for your hand if it is at all painful.”

“ Oh, it is not painful ; I had forgotten it almost. The acid will be all I want.”

CHAPTER III

DEALS SYMPATHETICALLY WITH THE UNCONSCIOUS POSE OF TWO WOMEN

IT is to be confessed that Minnie Turner's protest against her subordinate fate in the world did not lead to any serious cultivation of the qualities that would have helped her to rise superior to discontent. She was possessed of a sincere regard for what was noble and true in life, but at her present age she could see no direct advantage in remaining faithful to what was best in herself. Immersed in the little amenities of social life, she surrendered herself to their exactions, though conscious of how deficient was their recompense. Indeed, it had never occurred to her to do otherwise. To pursue a path of utter loneliness for the sake of satisfying her own higher nature was a course to which she was unequal.

She had an attractive manner that had made her liked by all she met. Yet people pronounced her insincere. That judgment was in reality both narrow and almost wholly untrue ; it had scarcely any other basis for its existence than the girl's easy tolerance of every one else's point of view. She was faithful to no one, and yet was never conscious

of any treason in that. Her sub-conscious recognition of the gay unreality of the life about her had but resulted in producing an unreal phase of herself to meet it.

It was with lively thoughts of enjoyment that she dressed herself on the morning of the picnic that had been arranged by the teachers of the Sunday-school. They were all to meet at the top of the town and drive out to a chosen spot.

She felt decidedly put out at meeting Miss Miller—a lady whose peculiarities were extensively known in the district. She was something more than a young woman in years, and something far less in intelligence. In looks she was considerably over thirty, her eyes were weak, and her yellow skin seemed to accentuate the harshness of her features. She had little conception of her outward self, and that of her inward one was wholly false. She was dishonest in words and conduct, and, according to mendacious rumour, had offered herself to most of the young men of her acquaintance. Any one who wished could get amusement out of her at no greater expense than being made partly conscious of the level reached to obtain it.

“Do you know if Mr Clarke will be at the picnic?” asked Miss Miller after greeting her.

“Fred—oh yes! I think he is sure to be there.”

“I mean his brother, Mr Haddie Clarke, the sharebroker.”

“I really don’t know. Are you very much interested in his movements?”

“I am. I like him very well. He is a very nice gentleman.”

“Is he?”

"He is, indeed. I wonder you haven't noticed it. I was told he would be there, and that it was you who had persuaded him to go. Is that true?"

"That I persuaded him? Not in the least true."

"It is strange what tales do get about. What do you think of Mr Clarke?"

"I never think of him."

"No, of course, he is too old for you. But do you think he would make a good husband?"

"Very likely. Are you thinking of asking him?"

"O Miss Turner, how can you talk so?" she said in mild protest.

"But why not, if you want him?"

"Do you think a woman has any right to ask? Really, every one thinks she shouldn't. I am sure I don't know why." She coughed to give herself a pause. "I think we ought to ask the man we want to marry us whether it is leap year or not."

"I think it a shame to have to wait until leap year, Miss Miller. And besides they are going to abolish leap year, did you hear?"

"I didn't. What are they doing it for? It is not true, is it?"

"What is it for? Don't ask me, Miss Miller. You know as well as I do that the men make the laws in this country."

"I wonder is that the reason?" said Miss Miller weighingly.

"Can you tell me of any other?" said Minnie. Her voice verged on impatience; she was wonder-

ing why she should be disquieted by Miss Miller's interest in Haddie. She attempted to persuade herself that she resented only the insult put upon womanhood.

At the top of the town she escaped from Miss Miller, and meeting Mrs Clarke in her buggy, was honoured with a seat. Fred had the reins, Mrs Hunter sitting beside him, and they drove out to the picnic ground without waiting for the 'busses. Minnie noted that Mrs Hunter's gaze was frequently directed in a mildly searching manner toward her, and that fact seemed in itself to be a promise of something she desired.

She studied the woman with earnest eyes. She was very good-looking, but without the regularity of feature that makes up prettiness. Her dark hair showed abundantly under a large rimmed hat. Her eyes revealed a depth of colour, and were capable of quick flashing glimpses. The mouth was well shaped but weak.

She looked to be about thirty-one, and was better dressed than Minnie could afford to be. The girl noted that with a sigh that lost itself in general discontent with the world.

They came to the end of their drive. Cultivated paddocks were visible, the young lucerne showing the prettiness of an intensity of colour. They passed over a small rise down into a nook of shade. An intense restfulness was in the air. To the right of them was a clear space before the scrub began. The trees towered above, dead wood littered the ground, making walking difficult. On the left the scrub was less thick; a winding track leading through it gave it an air of invitation.

Before them was the clear water, flowing rippling over the shallows, and the road, climbing the far bank, stretched evenly beyond.

When the 'busses arrived Mrs Clarke had her attention claimed by the Sunday-school superintendent, and Mrs Hunter and Minnie were left standing together.

"Let us go for a walk," said Mrs Hunter, taking the girl's arm.

Minnie's heart gave a leap, the vista of a kind fate opened before her. It was a far flight of thought that prompted a sigh of relief.

They came to the path leading into the scrub, where there was not room for them to walk together. They caught the notes of twittering birds, but were chiefly intent on the difficulties of the path. Minnie felt entranced by blissful fancies, but the intrusion of voices woke her to outward consciousness.

"Who is it?" asked Mrs Hunter.

"I can't see yet. Some one behind us."

Mrs Hunter turned to look, and putting a hand on Minnie's shoulder, held her close. The girl's upturned eyes appealing in deep simplicity conquered her heart.

When they saw Miss Miller and Fred come into view, they turned and went on, the woman laughing softly. "I wonder what she wanted with him?" she said.

Minnie, in the feeling that she did know, thought it needful to say, "I don't know."

"To make love to him," Mrs Hunter suggested. "Fred didn't seem a willing captive, but he never can say No."

"He is far too good-natured," the girl acknowledged.

"You ought to go to his rescue, Minnie."

"Consider the danger—to myself."

"Exactly, and we must not have you throw yourself away." She watched the girl's clear face, but wanting a spoken word of her pride in herself, she added, "Must we?"

Minnie tried to answer with smiling eyes, but that was not accepted as sufficient. She twitched her shoulders in her unwillingness for words. "Let me pretend to a little modesty," she asked.

"Oh, let us be better friends than that!" Earnest eyes gave a depth to her words.

"Are we to be friends, then?" Minnie questioned. She took the woman's hand, and noting the marriage ring, made a pretence of pulling it off.

"That is no hindrance, Minnie," said the other.

At a sudden prompting the girl kissed her hand, and then the ring. Her excited warmth found outlet in laughter. "You will think me very dramatic," she said.

"You have sealed the compact, Minnie. You must have no secrets from me now."

"Secrets!" she echoed in mild alarm.

"And at your age one has so many. But I have discovered one."

Her heart beat quickly, though she knew not definitely what she feared. "Fancy my having one of my own," she said. "Do tell me it; I am so fond of secrets."

"You are too innocent, Minnie," she said. "We shall never be friends if you treat me so. And you are trying to think I haven't seen. Let me

whisper it. Somebody is in love with——” She saw Minnie’s cheeks colour deeply, and was satisfied with that success.

“Whom do you mean?” said Minnie, at length, attempting to tune her voice to ignorance.

“O Miss Innocence, you can’t even guess! But, Minnie, you should see your face—white is the symbol of innocence, dear, not red and white in turns.”

“I don’t know what I look like, but I am sure I don’t know what you mean.” Had Mrs Hunter discovered her love for Haddie? She was sick at the thought of being able to face her by only an impotent feminine denial. And yet she felt passionately grateful to the woman. Looking towards her sympathy she felt a happiness that thrilled her in its strange intensity. A sense of the fulness of life tingled in her veins and exalted her. She wished she could reveal her heart to Mrs Hunter without the pain of words, and in her arms find tearful relief from excess of happiness.

“There is no need to be so distressed, Minnie. But if he will look at you in the way he did, as we came down, you must expect people to know all about it.”

Her head swam, she felt herself falling from dizzy heights. “Fred—you mean him?” she murmured.

“Now, Miss Innocence,” the other protested.

She felt weak and exhausted, shut out from all that was best in life. “I think you are mistaken,” she said with an effort. In her erroneous estimate of Mrs Hunter’s insight, she saw her love for Haddie was a thing to be afraid of. She wished

she had never been made conscious of it, and even told herself it was nonexistent.

"As if I could be!" said Mrs Hunter with a forgiving smile. "But do you really mean to say that you never knew before?"

"I never imagined it for a moment. And even now I don't think——" She halted as if in the effort of recalling half-forgotten memories.

"But, Minnie, you do think. You think you are much too good for him, and so do I."

"If Mrs Clarke heard you she would be shocked."

They had come out on the bank of the river, and they found a seat in the shade. Near their feet the water rippled softly over a stony bottom. Mrs Hunter drew the girl to her and caressed her face; such endearment moved Minnie to throw down her defences.

"Oh, it can't be true!" she cried. "I won't have it so! What would Mrs Clarke do to me if it were?"

"What can she do?"

"She will say all sorts of things about me."

"When you refuse him?"

"Oh, please don't. It hasn't got that far yet."

"But it will shortly."

"No, no; there are other reasons why it mustn't. But you don't understand."

"My dear Minnie, you seem dreadfully afraid of something. What is it at all?"

"Don't you see what revenge Mrs Clarke will have?" she cried, her face colouring. "She will say it was not Fred I wanted—but Haddie."

It was only when she met the girl's glance that she saw the inner significance of such reasoning.

The revelation of where her girlish love was set came so suddenly that the first view of it shocked her. The incongruities of such a match struck at her idolised conceptions of the girl. He was almost as old as herself, and Minnie was but twenty. But, worst of all, it was Minnie herself who was in love.

The girl looked up, conscious that her secret was out, but hiding that knowledge from herself. "Don't you think she will be likely to say that?" she asked softly.

Mrs Hunter resented even that small attempt to mislead her. "That would be a mean revenge," was all she said.

"Don't you think her capable of it?" said Minnie, brightening. "It seems to me that it would be a natural thing for her to say." But she saw the need of confiding in Mrs Hunter, of testifying to a faith in her that was checked only by the warnings of her own distrustful nature. She saw regrets before her in Mrs Hunter's knowledge, or continued ignorance. She had a pity for herself, a hate of her love for Haddie.

"The question is—how far it would be true?" she answered, watching the girl steadily.

Minnie's heart sprang to mad beatings; she seemed to have been suddenly brought to the edge of a fearful gulf. "True!" she murmured, but her voice failed. The word sounded like broken acknowledgment of the verity of the charge.

"Is it really true, Minnie?" asked Mrs Hunter, tenderly.

A pain shot through her heart, and her blood seemed to halt in her veins. With quivering

breath she tried to speak, and could not. Her failure summoned tears.

“Dearest Minnie, I don’t know whether I am glad or sorry.”

“Don’t you like him?” she murmured, her cheeks burning.

“Not well enough to think—— But I have not known him very intimately.”

“Why don’t you like him?” she was asked.

“I do like him well enough, Minnie, for ordinary purposes. But not well enough to hand you over to him.”

The girl quivered in a sense of her nakedness ; her mind and heart were bare. She saw the horror of having revealed an unmaidenly aspect of herself, and struck an echoing note of despair. “Oh, why have I told you it all? Why have I been so foolish? It is not true—not one word of it. You would not speak to me if it were.”

“You are ashamed of having trusted me, Minnie!”

“It is not quite that,” she wailed.

“My dear girl, I can assure you I will never give you reason to repent it.”

“But you do not understand. It is not really true. I feel it so myself. And it is only lately—within the last day or two. I am not myself ; I do not know what has come over me.”

“I will forget it if you wish, dear.”

The confusion she was leading to alarmed her ; she endeavoured to clear her path. “If I understood myself better, I would know what to say,” she murmured. “That is why I ought not to have confessed. I would trust you with anything ;

only I may have said more than I feel—about him."

"I am afraid not, Minnie. You are the kind of girl who would say less."

"But it is so immodest. He, you know—it will end as it began."

"I will pray for your happiness, Minnie."

"You will not think the worse of me for it?"

"No, dear."

"And you will forget it as soon as you can."

She added in generous promise: "We both will."

It was in the fulness of the wish to draw closer to the woman that Minnie found herself questioning her in regard to her girlhood. Mrs Hunter gave a dim outline of her history, and spoke with tender sorrow of her dead parents and sister. Hallowed memories seemed to cement the bond of sisterhood between the girl and herself. She insisted that Minnie should call her by her second Christian name of "Alison," to remind her of dear vanished days.

"We shall go hand-in-hand through the world," she said. "Nothing shall separate us."

Minnie's eyes sought hers and held them. Her purest feelings were stirred, and she had a rapturous sense of what comradeship could mean. "I would trust you more than I trust myself," she said.

CHAPTER IV

MARKS A STEP OF PROGRESS

IT was early in the afternoon that Haddie Clarke was visible, driving along the Widgee Road. He was old enough to feel that his attendance at the picnic was a partly childish performance, but he tried to believe that events would militate that sentiment.

He was a young man of supreme self-reliance; he believed in himself, and in the truth of his opinions. Certainly he was clever within his limits, but his intense egoism permitted him to acknowledge little or no superiority in others. And yet his self-confidence, though always in evidence, was seldom very offensively prominent, for he was gifted with an enviable degree of tact; so that there were some people generous enough to assert that, for a young man who had met with early success in life, he was comparatively unassuming.

He had made money in his business as a broker, and for some years past had been looked upon as one of the most eligible bachelors of the district. Yet the knowledge of that fact had not spoilt him. He was not without his share of chivalrous regard

for the simple purity of the feminine mind in its higher phases.

His domestic relations were of a kind to nourish self-conceit. His brother's widow looked to him for worldly guidance, and accepted him as more than averagely noble and manly; while Maud paid him the respect due to one she feared. But for himself, he felt in his inner consciousness that he had not much ground in common with Mrs Clarke, though he was always considerate towards her. For his brother Fred he felt he was in some degree responsible, because he was the elder. But he had no intense feeling, and what sense of relation he felt was mostly an expression of selfishness, of the desire to protect himself and others of his kin against the world.

It was a golden day, the air light and clear, and the sky a hazy blue, with patches of white cloud resting on the low horizon. Before him was the road holding its way up a gentle slope beneath shady trees. On a hill to the left was a farmhouse with its sheds and drays, and the furrowed land came down to the fence near the road. Behind him was a flood-swept field, mournful in dying tints, and beyond that was a wave of corn sweeping over the hill.

When he reached the picnic ground Mrs Clarke and Mrs Hunter came to meet him.

"How are you getting on?" he asked.

"Fairly well," Mrs Clarke answered. "But you are late in getting down."

"Oh, not very. What have you done with all the people? There doesn't seem to be many about?"

"A good many of them have gone off for a quiet flirtation," said Mrs Hunter.

"The usual picnic custom," said Haddie.

"I see you have had experience. I wonder that it never led to marriage."

"I am never going to let Haddie marry," said Mrs Clarke.

"There is no one willing to marry me," he said.

"Have you looked?" questioned Mrs Hunter.

"Not very carefully."

"Perhaps I could find some one for you."

Mrs Clarke was called away to welcome fresh arrivals, and Mrs Hunter and Haddie walked towards the river.

"What have you been doing all the morning?" he asked.

"I have been with Minnie Turner nearly all the time."

"You have been telling one another secrets, I suppose."

"Oh, not quite that," she said lightly. "But I will confess to being very much taken with her, and I have promised myself to grow more fond of her."

"Yes, Minnie is worth cultivating; she is such excellent company. And it is only the other day I was telling her that it was a pity you two didn't know one another better."

"Were you, indeed? And what made you think we had anything in common?" she enquired in surprise.

He took the opportunity to insist on a more than average clearness of insight. But he explained his view of their mutual suitability with

so much tact as to secure her laughing accordance. She found herself on the freest terms with him, which the recognition of his wish to please served but to accentuate.

She felt drawn closer to him through Minnie, and could think she saw how the girl came to lose her heart to him. He had strong masculine qualities, combined with refinement. Though she felt that he was scarcely worthy to become the husband of her dear Minnie, she thought he must be as near as any man was likely to come, in her estimate.

"What has become of Minnie, now?" he asked.

"She went off with some others to a farm on the other side. She said she wouldn't be long."

"Was Fred with them?"

"I think so."

"I felt sure he would be."

"Why. Do you think there is anything between them?"

"Not exactly; but it is just possible that it may develop into that. Fred seems to have a weakness for her company."

They came to the river, and, turning to the left, climbed a steep path up the bank, and were caught in the cool air of the scrub. There came the tinkling note of a cow-bell, and the faint rippling of water. The leaves stirred in the wind; the birds twittered as they rested on the trees. They heard the whistling call of the whip-bird, and then the whirring sound of wings above them. Strewn over the ground were autumn leaves and fallen branches, and the sunshine streamed in amid the trees, painting the scene with light and shade.

"I saw Ethel on the veranda as I was passing," he said.

"Did you see Mr Hunter as well?"

"No, but I saw an elderly lady with her. Ethel called out to me to bring her muma home."

"And are you going to?"

"If she wants to go," he said, looking at her.

"She does, and she doesn't."

"That is rather an uncertain state of mind."

"I suppose it is."

"I'll be only too glad to drive you back if you want to go," he said.

"That was Ethel's grandmother you saw," she said in explanation. "She must have arrived by the mail train. Mr Hunter didn't know whether she was coming to-day or to-morrow, and insisted on my coming to the picnic."

"Quite right of him, too."

"It was right of him to insist, and wrong of me to come, you mean?"

"You know I never meant that."

"What do you mean, then?"

He looked at her troubled face, but would not stoop to answer her impatience. When her eyes questioned his mood, he turned his head to listen sedulously to the sound of voices far behind them.

She watched him till her irritable feelings sank, and she smiled in thinking of the petulance of her humour. She saw he was fingering in an unconscious way the ivory trinket that she already had occasion to remember. She looked at his face, but it was still averted, and the wild impulse to dare him to a repetition of that incident seized her. The figure dropped from his hand, and she

stooped quickly for it. He caught her wrists, and she lost her balance on the uneven ground, but his arm saved her. With her upturned face so close to him, he threw aside the world, and kissed her on the mouth.

CHAPTER V

FEELS IN A STATE OF INDECISION

UNDoubtedly Mrs Hunter made no real attempt to cultivate cordial relations with her husband's mother. In her own mind she was satisfied that it was useless for her to think of their getting on together. The most she could look for was a minimum of friction. For the ground of her antagonism was impregnable ; it was that she was treated as if she were of inferior clay. She felt it as a protest against her husband's choice of a wife, and was maddened by such injustice. She resisted strongly every thought that hinted at the woman's superiority.

She was conscious of how real was the irritation she felt at her husband's exalted admiration for his mother. That fact seemed not only to accentuate the reality of the barrier that had so long been growing up between them, but also to insist that the fault was chiefly hers. But she had the knowledge of the desires of her own womanly heart to refute that. No, the blame of it all was that a man by his very nature could not continue in love. Was not that fact exemplified in the lives of all around her ? She felt on a wave of passionate despair that man was false to God's scheme of creation.

She had a woman's belief in love and its sacredness, she felt what a degree of difference it could make in her own life. But there was nothing for her to hope for in that direction. She could recall with what agony of wretchedness she had arrived at that belief.

She saw his affections as wholly centred on Ethel. He was the child's playmate, and she his comrade. The bond that united them seemed but to grow firmer with the child's years. For herself she could but feel sick at the thought of being jealous. And it was doubtless the fear of where a brooding sense of her wrongs might carry her that helped her in its own contradictory way to a real indifference to the mild estrangement of her husband and herself.

In some hope of escaping from the threats of an empty existence, she had caught gladly at the prospect of a close friendship with Minnie. She undoubtedly had a somewhat exaggerated sense of the girl's qualities, but she was not deceiving herself in the conviction that their natures were very similar. Further intercourse had but increased her gratitude to the girl, and her husband's confession of Minnie's attractiveness served to inspire her with a new confidence in herself.

She went up with Minnie to Mrs Clarke's on the occasion of a farewell evening, given on the eve of Fred's departure to Sydney. It seemed that he had succeeded in conquering Mrs Clarke's opposition to his leaving her, when his uncle, who was a solicitor in Sydney, wrote offering him a position in his office.

Mrs Clarke's selection of guests was not the most fortunate. For the most part they were adherents

of the Presbyterian Church of the district, and they represented different and even indifferent ranks of society. Those of a higher social grade assumed an arrogant superiority to the rest, but their pretension met chiefly with affected contempt. There was decidedly more than a hint of antagonism in the friendly gathering.

After Mrs Hunter and Minnie had entered the drawing-room, Fred drifted over to them, when opportunity offered. Minnie smiled a welcome.

"So we are really to lose you to-morrow!" she said.

"Don't you feel sad?"

"We all do."

He looked at her as if holding ~~so~~ thought in his mind. "You will think of me a little when I am away?" he said.

"I will try to." She lifted her eyes to a momentary look at him. It was with some surprise to herself that she was suddenly struck with a sense of the contrast between his worth to the world, and his worth to her. A reflection on herself was vaguely implied; but a note of Haddie's laughter thrilled her and carried her to happiness.

They went out on the veranda when the music of a waltz began.

"This is the last dance I shall have with you for some time," he said.

"Yes, I suppose it is."

"You don't seem very much affected, you know," he said with a smile.

"Perhaps I shall be after you have gone, Fred," she answered.

"Of course it is natural that I should regret you

more than you should me." He ended with sudden seriousness: "Indeed I would like you to know, Minnie, before I go, how grateful I am to you."

"For what?" she questioned incredulously.

"Well, of course it is rather difficult to define exactly—for what you have always been to me."

"But I am not conscious of deserving your gratitude." She rejected his attempt at impressiveness, but rose herself to a quiet insistence. "I have never done anything very specially for you. We have always been good friends——"

"Well, that is what I mean. And I hope we shall always continue to be good friends. I want you to always think well of me, for I really value your opinion."

"You must over-value it to do that," she murmured with a pretty affectation of modesty.

"Now, you are talking nonsense," he insisted.

"And so are you," she answered. She was anxious to escape from the whole subject, and attempted to lead him from it. "The sky looks heavy; is it going to rain?"

"I don't think so."

"Let us stop; I am tired."

"So soon?"

"I am not feeling very well."

"What is the matter, Minnie?"

"The heat of the drawing-room has given me a headache, I think. You had better leave me here; it is so much cooler."

"I am not going to leave you," he said gaily. He was playing, though not for the first time, with the thought of being in love with her. It was so alluring to regard himself as all but captivated,

and she was so prettily feminine to-night. A quiet sense of restfulness came over him ; the wish to feel, if only for a moment, that her life belonged to him, knocked at his heart. The sweet womanly aspect of her gave him a constrained thought of the kinship in mystery that united all that was feminine in the world.

He knew that Mrs Clarke would not be willing to accept Minnie as the wife of her brother-in-law, and though he was honest enough to recognise that the only sacrifice he would make would be a very small social one, he felt that Mrs Clarke's estimate of Minnie was some protection against any weakness in himself. Though, once conscious that he was really in love with any girl, he would not stop to consider any one's sentiments but his own. With Minnie, however, he was never likely to be wholly in love, if only for no other reason than that they had known one another so long. He felt that there was nothing in her that would ever claim his exalted admiration. He could not rise to a wholly lover-like conception of her. There was his complaint—she did not compel him to see in her his ideal. Yet he was in the mood to be in love.

Was the failure partly in himself? The desire for possession of her ran through his blood ; not a high form of love as he knew, yet it compelled his attention. To tingle her ears with whispered passionate phrases, and have his own thrilled by the more modest feminine note, to hold her pretty head in his arm, and her face close to his, to meet her lips with his own, and look into her deep,

earnest eyes—all such desires were in him. They were surely the pure offspring of love.

Ah! if she were but in love with him the question would be decided. It but needed some reason outside himself to compel him to surrender. She was intrinsically superior to any girl he knew; her worth was not in question.

He wondered if his case were peculiar; whether any one had ever been half in love, and what sort of married life would result under that threatening circumstance. But he was attracted to the fancy that he would be more in love with her as a wife than a sweetheart, that her complete dependency on him would inspire love.

They stood near the steps, watching the dancers as they whirled past. She was happy in seeing that Haddie had Alison for a partner.

"Let us take a look at the flowers," he suggested. "It will be for the last time."

"How everything echoes of that," she answered in a momentary responsiveness to his mood. She silently followed him, and they went round the garden beds. "Hadn't we better go 'back now?" she said at length. "I think I felt a spot of rain."

"Let me get you a rose first; there are some nice scented ones over here."

They went to the side of the house. The girl's heart beat lightly, yet she was unwilling to know it. The conception of him in her mind was of nothing noble, yet his presence seemed to hold her to kind thoughts of him. She looked back at the house and the dark clouds overhead, and stopped in the pretence that the view had claimed her

fancy. The sky was a moving darkness with a faint glimmer of a moon shining through. The house with its succession of lights showed as a welcome refuge; windows were aglow, and the veranda was decked with lanterns that sent faint ribands of lights across the trees.

"Here are the two best," said Fred from behind her.

"They are sweet," she murmured, inhaling the perfume.

"You will keep them in remembrance of me?"

"Yes, Fred. In remembrance of how sweet you were, of how I liked you, of how nice you could be, and—of everything. Thank you, Fred."

"I haven't given them to you yet. How dare you make fun of me!"

"Well, you can keep your roses; I don't want them," she said in assumed indignation.

She moved away, but he caught her quickly by the shoulders, and pressed her close to him. His heart was afire—and shivering. He revelled in, and shrank from the happiness of the moment. It was in the fear of where he was being hurried that he stumbled on the words, "For the last time."

She was clear of his embrace before he quite realised her strength. "The first—and the last," she said pantingly.

"Won't you let me pin the roses in for you?"

She admired the cleverness that enabled him to give a natural colour to the incident; she was not calm enough to see that his very dulness was responsible. She felt that she must yield in the pretence that she saw no more serious aspect than he acknowledged.

"I'll put this one in your hair," he said.

"If you like."

"There, you look splendid now. Wait moment, it wants to fall out." He kissed her hair and she faced him quickly. His sincerity was challenged. "Darling," he said, but his voice broke wretchedly on the word, and he wondered if it had been audible to her.

She smiled with a pleasing tolerance of his embarrassment, and waited for him to speak. He saw that she had heard, and her superior indifference chilled him. He had no words to utter; the stupidity of his position angered him.

"Here is the rain; let us go," she said.

The moaning wind carried the ominous sound to them, and they ran to the house. For the rest of the evening he evaded her. But he went to his room with a nervous sense of disappointment; he protested against the feeling, but could not rid himself of it.

Yet he had every reason for contentment. He was free of every spark of tender sentiment towards her, he could now readily forget her and forget what he had momentarily wished her to be to him. He could congratulate himself on the ending of it all.

Yet he sank again to a passionate regret for the incident. What was the inner reason? In a brave mood he struggled manfully against the sense of causeless irritation, smothering it with a view of a bright future. But it returned, and justified its insistence in a question that startled him, "Did she refuse you?"

CHAPTER VI

RECORDS A REACTION

THE shower became heavy, and the wind drove the rain in pelting drops on to the veranda, compelling the dancers to seek shelter inside the house.

Mrs Hunter saw Minnie secured for a game of cards, but could not herself be tempted. She stood listening to the noises about her with a wearied tolerance, then went out on the veranda. She found that the rain had ceased, and the clouds were lifting. The moon shone down, lighting up the wet earth, and revealing glistening water-drops on the leaves of the trees. The wind blew softly, and she heard the dripping fall of water about her. The street lamp opposite played fantastic tricks with the waving trees. At times she could fancy people were hiding behind them, and then in a wave of their branches the delusion was revealed.

The stillness touched her to a quick wakefulness and a timid fear. She listened attentively, and, in response, her heart beat fast. She grew quite afraid, thinking herself precognisant of a danger that her mind would not accept. But when she

went back into the warmth of the house she was ashamed of her baby mood, and returned to the veranda. She went to the far end and rested herself on a couch. She felt then that the action of her heart betokened weakness more than fear, and she was aware that she was on the verge of fainting. She lay still, wishing for victory over that weakness.

Haddie Clarke, coming out on the veranda, was momentarily surprised to find it unoccupied. It was improbable that she had gone into the garden, yet he explored the paths, and came back, convinced and perplexed. More in the intention of making his search thorough than in hope of finding her he went to the end of the veranda. He was joyously surprised at seeing a figure stretched on the couch.

"Am I intruding?" he asked, but received no answer. He bent over her, and, seeing that her eyes were closed, he felt sure she was asleep. He stood by silently, and the quiet prettiness of her peaceful innocence filled him with happiness. He felt a gleam of her purity within himself, and encountered the regret that fate should have made him so much beneath her in making him man.

He was startled at the sudden revelation of what was in his heart; at the convincing feeling of love for her. The outline of her form seemed to insist on the inescapable allurement of sex. His blood was fired, and he gloried in exhibiting a reckless contrast to his earlier thoughts, and stooping over her, he kissed passionately her lips and cheeks.

He saw a shiver run through her; and an active upward movement of her hand, as if to

thrust him away, gave him a chilling sense of his infamy. She opened her eyes, and seeing him standing there, closed them again.

“What is the matter? Are you ill? Shall I get Minnie to come to you?”

She voiced a weary cry “No.”

“I think I had better bring her,” he insisted.

She saw that she must recover to save herself from the danger he threatened her with. She opened her eyes slowly.

He endured a silence, but said at length, “Shall I get a glass of water, then?”

He felt the significance of her silence in sharp contrast to his wish to be of use. He knew that hate of him was stirring within her, and he tried to shape his justification, but could touch no presentable facts.

When he returned with the water she was sitting up. He offered the glass, but she ignored him for a time, then said with measured calmness: “I don’t want it.”

The very hopelessness of inflicting on him a sufficient punishment for the degradation she felt was like a weight on her brain. Her thoughts cried out against the defencelessness of womanhood. She got up to escape from his presence, and staggered in the effort. He put his arm out to save her, and she stopped and turned on him with flashing eyes.

“Would you dare?” she cried.

The intenseness of the position thrilled him to a desperate defence. “Forgive me,” he said; “I could not help myself. I love you.”

He saw her shrink back. She moved her hand

almost as if in protest, but sank it to her side in consciousness of her impotence. Her eyes stared at him, her lips moved as if on some words, but no sound issued.

In a vivid premonition of the despair that a review of the difficulties of his position would occasion, he felt the danger of inaction. Recklessness was his best equipment. "You are surprised and shocked," he said. "But you need have no fear; I do not intend you any harm."

"You are mad," she cried. The echo of her voice convinced her of the mistake of having spoken. She seemed to have sunk to his level in answering him.

"Madly in love—with you!"

"Let me pass," she cried.

"Just one moment, then you may. You have heard the last of this; I shall never annoy you with it again. But understand, I do not think that it makes you a worse woman; I will not admit that it taints you in any way. I am not responsible for it, nor are you, yet you feel that the words degrade you, while I do not. Is the fault in me or you?"

"What do you mean?" she gasped. Her mind seemed to have been suddenly blinded by a flash.

His prompting was to give himself up to despair; it seemed impossible that mere words could shatter her feminine fears. It was scarcely more than an attempt to be loyal to the false image of himself that he had presented, that he continued—"Simply this: that my love does not threaten you—your peace, your happiness, nor anything about you. It is mine. Now you may pass—and think what you will of me."

She went to Mrs Clarke's bedroom for her hat and cloak, and succeeded in attracting no attention. When she passed down the steps she could not fail to note that he was still where she had left him. He was standing by the railing; looking out into the night. At the sight a confusion of thoughts swept through her, tending towards some faint plea for him. In realising the hopelessness of defining the degree of his guilt, she felt that she was being decoyed into a possible forgiveness. She protested against that threatened danger, and in the idea of momentarily escaping from it all, she ran down the path.

Out in the street, with the cool wind blowing against her face, she seemed to gain some physical strength, and, seeing that no one was following her, she felt less of the weakness of dependent womanhood. She pondered on an excuse to give her husband for her early return. She dared not tell him the truth, or at least she did not wish to, until she had better weighed the significance of the relative phases of it.

Nevertheless, the purity of her mind would not permit her to decide definitely on a falsehood. Even the whole truth might be told to-night, might be won from her, though a bare record of fact would be less than just to herself, while to pretend to a depth of disgust against the man that she did not feel would be cowardly. Viewed in any light, her husband would think she was tainted by the incident. Perhaps he would in his own mind consider that she had given encouragement, or, at lowest, that the man thought he had received encouragement. She reviewed her conduct under the incidents

of her contact with Haddie, and had to confess that it revealed a more unsuspecting nature than she would now care to subscribe to.

Would her husband really blame her? In his own mind he must, however generous he might be in words. For of course she would also have to tell him of Haddie's conduct at the picnic, and of how she had, in spite of her wifely indignation, been ultimately induced to forgive him. His repentance had seemed to her so convincing that, in recalling it, she could not bring herself to believe it wholly assumed. But Edgar would protest at having been so long kept in ignorance. He could not be less than indignant at her deception.

That she was able to think of Minnie now was to her considerable evidence of recovered calmness. Yet she found little to entice her in that direction. How much was she to tell the girl, how far reveal the unworthiness of the man she loved? How much was she to disclose to Minnie of what she kept from her husband. She felt that she was surrounded by confusions. She must deceive Edgar to protect herself from his censure. She must be dishonest to Minnie, and take the risk of losing her friendship in the end. Yet her blood revolted against self-condemnation. She was blameless; that the world would not think so was her undeserved punishment. She cried out piteously against the necessity of deception. She felt that she was being made unworthy of all those dear to her, though by no reason in herself.

In simple need of defence against such thoughts, she sank back to a more considerate view of Haddie. She felt amazed at the speed with which she

approached forgiveness of him. She seemed to be swept from the anchorage of hard and fast morality into drifting currents. Convinced that her old standards were narrow, she was still afraid of new ones. She tried to look solely at his part in the matter, but saw she could not pity him without committing herself. The fact that he had not asked for pity seemed to threaten her, but her timid nature shrank from acquitting him.

The door was opened to her by her husband, who expressed a surprise at seeing her so soon. "Were they afraid to stay late because of the rain?" he asked.

"They haven't broken up yet," she said, as she went before him into the sitting-room. She sat on the couch, and, taking off her hat, laid herself down.

He took his chair at the table, and waited patiently for her to say how far she had enjoyed herself. She smiled as he closed the book he had been reading, such a hint could not hurry her.

"Kate, are you going to sleep?" he said.

She started up in affectation of sudden wakefulness. "Where is your mother?" she asked.

"She has gone to bed to get rid of her headache."

"Or to escape me," she suggested.

"Kate, it is childish to talk so," he cried spiritedly.

"Is it?" She reflected on the matter quite other than childish at her heart, and the depth of the difficulty of telling it to an unsympathetic husband. She had felt in his mother's absence that it was Heaven's wish that he should be told

all. Yet he was making it impossible for her. "Childish!" she said echoingly, after a silence.

He looked up in surprise, then accepted defeat in contempt of the pettiness of the warfare. She noted his look, and went back to her recumbent position with a sigh.

"I am afraid you are not well, Kate," he said. He gave her a long time in which to answer, and receiving only her silence, he went over to her. "Aren't you well, Kate?"

She met his soft, enquiring eyes till a consciousness of guilt overcame her, and stretching out her hands to him, she sighed cryingly in her wretchedness. He sat down beside her and pressed her fingers with a lover's warmth. Remembrance of old days swept over him. It was unfortunate that his blush was more for his past self than his present.

He could not conceive that she would encourage the lover in her husband. He recognised their passionless regard for one another as the natural issue of life. Yet he was sufficiently convinced that he would lose nothing here by giving rein to his tenderness.

"What is the matter, Kate?" he asked.

She answered softly: "I am afraid I am not well."

He waited, hating to question her, to seem to insist on knowing more than she wanted to tell. Yet she was in the mood to be questioned, to have him over-shadowingly enfold her at every turn.

"I know I am unhappy," she cried, twitching her hands to be free of him.

"Unhappy, Kate!" he intoned. "My dear, dear:

girl!" He sank his lips to her cheeks, yet, noting her to be dully receptive of the caress, he could but think she was indifferent to it. "What makes you unhappy, Kate?" he asked.

"I don't know." But seeing that such feminine attitude distressed him, she added in justice to herself, "You do."

"Tell me how, Kate. I do not think—— Unhappy, darling!"

She encountered a cynical reflection on the stupidity that kept men ignorant of things so very apparent. How was she to tell him that she was lonely, and tired of being alone, that she was miserable because her husband did not love her.

"Very unhappy, Kate?" he questioned in his solicitude. It seemed as if he could but centre round that complaining word.

"It is my own fault as much as any one's," she said, looking up with a smile.

He admired her even balance of judgment; she wanted it to be rejected and condemned.

"No one is perfect," he said playfully.

"No one in this house," she answered with a tinge of bitterness.

"No, dear. But you and the mater—you don't seem to get on too well, do you? I don't think you have been very considerate of one another. But I am very glad you have spoken now, dear; we can put things on a new footing."

"You will not tell your mother!"

"I must, Kate. It is the best way, and the shortest. She will not be unjust—you need not fear. She is not capable of misjudging you."

"I don't want you to tell her," she wailed.

"But, Kate," he protested in dismay. He welcomed an escape from the difficulty. "I will pretend that the wish comes from me," he said brightly.

"She will know I asked you."

"And if she does, dear, what does it matter? She is woman enough to commend the woman in you. Why will you insist on misjudging her?"

"Me, of course!" She stopped on the verge of tears.

"O Kate, Kate!"

She was moved to repentance at the tone of despair. "Can't you see, Edgar, that I told you only, because—because—"

He bent close to her, burlesquing the hesitating word in an endearing way, "Because—"

"Because I want you and no one else. Because I feel that if I have you nothing can make me unhappy." She drew closer to him, and looked up with a soft, appealing glance.

"My darling!" he murmured as he kissed her.

He saw only that she asked for "the friendly inter-dependence of husband and wife. He pitied her for her unhappiness; pitied himself, too, as having part in it. A faint feeling of injustice in having linked her life with his own swept through him. He seemed to realise that woman was made for something higher than companionship with man. And he could not do less than tenderly admire the nobleness of her who had never reproached him. The womanly nature was lovable in its simplicity and innocence. All she asked for to make her happy was affectionate sympathy from him.

His fixity of mind debarred him from seeing that she asked for love, for the renewal of a passion that had been dead these years. He saw in her present mood only the outpouring of an engaging feminine weakness. But he was caught by a vision of what life might be if love were permanent, till it faded from him as a thing ideal. But a manly admiration of the prettiness of the womanly nature remained.

"You are a dear little woman, Kate," he said.

"Why, Edgar?"

"Because I say so."

"You can say so as often as you will."

"Every day, then?"

"Oftener."

"Twice a day?"

"Oftener still."

"But I always think it."

She assented faintly. She saw how great an effort was his love-making, and wondered if that were only because of its strangeness. How far had her appeal to him for love touched him? Had it reached his heart, or was he only schooling himself to be responsive to her mood? In her uncertainty, resentment, though it did not take shape itself in her mind, yet hovered dim and formless; and in its nebulous state gave birth to the curious childish thought, that if he did not begin to love her it might soon be too late.

"Will you go to bed, now? I suppose you are tired, dear."

"No, I am not."

"Did you dance very much?"

"Very little."

“How was that?”

“The rain came on and stopped us.”

“I was forgetting about that. Did Miss Turner enjoy herself?”

“I think so. She looked well—one of the best there.”

“And did Kate enjoy herself?”

She nodded a negative.

“Why, what was the matter?”

“I didn’t feel well; I fainted.” She looked frankly up in the joy of seeing herself embarked on immediate revelation, and loving him as the impersonation of all that was dearest to her.

“You fainted, dear! Was that why you came home so early?”

“Yes, Edgar.”

“And I thought that it was because of the rain—that you were all leaving early. But do you feel better now? Tell me about it. I am anxious; I cannot quite understand these attacks in you. There seems to be nothing to justify them; your heart is not weak.”

“I was merely sitting down, and the feeling came over me.”

“Have you any pain as well? Or is it only a sort of drowsiness that seizes you?”

“A little pain near the heart at times. But I am sure that doesn’t mean anything.”

“You have been taking that medicine regularly?”

“No. I didn’t like it; and I thought I was getting better without it.”

“You must take it again, Kate.”

“I will, if you want me to.”

“I do want you to, dear. I must take care of

you if you will not take care of yourself. Though of course in one way the season is doubtless chiefly responsible ; it has been very trying. But the point is, I don't like these attacks in my little woman, though they do not mean much."

"I am never really unconscious in them, Edgar. I can tell most of what is going on around me."

"I suppose you caused some sensation among them."

"I was out on the veranda by myself. No one saw me go off."

"Poor Kate!"

She was debating how to open to him the full facts to which he was entitled. She passionately wished it were all told, yet could not begin. She shivered on the threshold of what she had to face.

"Ethel is not very well," he said. "She was crying in her sleep, and mother took her into her room."

Her heart seemed to stop. In her excitable fancy she saw how the woman had in some mysterious way realised her degradation, her unworthiness to have her own child near her. She said with a flash of despair: "What did she do that for?"

"To comfort her."

"That is the only reason—of course."

"Kate, what on earth is the matter?"

"Nothing." She hatefully saw herself flung back to self-dependence. The woman's early retirement had been for no other reason than to test her, to see if she would confess to her husband. She would not be driven ; rather than that she would defy them all.

"What other reason could there be?" he asked.

"None."

He threw aside the answer as contemptuously feminine. "Let us come to a clear understanding, Kate," he said decisively. "What do you mean to insinuate against the mater? Is it anything intelligible? Do you think she shows fondness for Ethel in the hope of annoying you?"

"I wish you had never married me," she murmured cryingly.

He stupidly under-estimated the significance of her words, and went on: "For if you do, Kate, let me say that it shows a childish pettiness of spirit that I never thought to find in you." He stood up to better assert the degree of his mortification, and looked at her as she quivered in tears.

"I am sure you all wish it," she said brokenly, as she rose to go to her room. "Even Ethel must wish she had a better mother."

"Good-night, Kate," he answered, willing to show that he attached no meaning to her words.

It is significant not less of the self-sufficiency of feminine impulses than of a contradictory acknowledgment and denial of the needs of her womanly heart, that later in the night she could conceive the necessity for locking her door.

It seemed essential not only to shut herself in—but him out.

CHAPTER VII

IS SECRETLY IN SYMPATHY WITH A CHILD'S PROTEST

OUT towards the Red Hill the houses are not of imposing appearance, though they have their pretensions. The streets, winding uncertainly, are littered and stony. But the outlook into distance is kinder to the eye. Dwellings are visible to a far extent, pretty in their disorder. The many derricks and their circling wheels, the smoke of engines, the roar of crushing mills, and the wooden trailing flumes tell of the honest fulfilment of many labours.

Minnie Turner lived with her parents on the near side of the Hill. There were green vines draping the veranda, and a few flowers on bloom in the beds at the sides.

Mrs Turner was giving affectionate attention to a rose bush near the fence. She was short in figure, with a care-lined face, and eyes that had dimmed with years. She looked a motherly little woman, possessed of a just share of human sympathy. In appearance her daughter was but a younger, brighter copy of herself, but their natures were not similar. Minnie in that particular had taken chiefly after her father.

She was on the point of going inside when she saw a little girl, dressed prettily in white, entering the gate. Her heart was conquered by the captivating sweetness of the childish face.

"Well, my little dear, who is it you want?" she asked.

"Please, does Miss Turner live here?" Ethel enquired.

"She does. I am Miss Turner's mother. And now you must tell me who you are."

"I am Ethel Hunter."

"Oh, you are Dr Hunter's little girl? I have heard Minnie speak of you. Come inside, dear."

"Muma sent me to ask her to come to dinner, if she could."

"She is in the house, Ethel. So you can deliver the message; she will like it better from you. But did you come all the way by yourself? You must be tired."

She sat Ethel on a chair in the parlour, and went to find Minnie. The child stared about her with wondering eyes. She could see that almost everything about her was on a smaller scale than at her own home, and she marvelled at the fact that Miss Turner did not live in a larger house. Nevertheless, she considered the pictures on the walls very pretty, and liked them better than the ones that hung on the bare walls of her mother's drawing-room.

Minnie came in and kissed her playfully. "What do you want with me, little woman?"

"Muma wants you to come back with me to dinner, if you can. And she says we can all go for a moonlight drive after."

"And you came all the way by yourself to invite me? You are a good little girl."

"You had better get ready at once if you are going, Minnie," said Mrs Turner.

"If you don't want me for anything I shall go."

"I wanted to go down to see Mrs Miller. Perhaps you will go instead; it is not so far out of your way. Just enquire how the poor old body is."

"I don't mind; though of course it could wait till to-morrow. However, just as you please."

"I would like you to go, Minnie."

"Your wish shall be obeyed then, mother dear."

Mrs Turner entertained Ethel while Minnie was getting dressed. She asked the child innumerable questions, but Ethel seemed to realise that they were all the outcome of a desire to be liked, and she was not afraid. She grew quite at ease, and felt as if Miss Turner's mother were an old friend. In parting, Mrs Turner confessed to an excessive degree of fond interest in her, and she had to promise that she would come to see her some other day.

Minnie and Ethel came to Mrs Miller's house and went up the path. Some hardy hibiscus and rose-trees were in the garden, and the air was scented with the perfume of verbena. On one side of the house were some mulberry trees, deadened by winter winds, and a passion vine trailed on the fence. The house was old and worn, and rested on very low blocks, the veranda touching the ground. The front door was some distance down between two projecting rooms. Miss Miller

answered their knock, and insisted on their entrance. She took them into the sitting-room, permitting them to keep their hats at Minnie's vigorous request.

"Mother is much better," she said. "She is up to-day for the first time. She is in the back garden, and will be in presently. I know she will be glad to see you. What is the child's name, Miss Turner?"

"She is Dr Hunter's little girl. Her name is Ethel."

Mrs Miller came in shortly after. She was a bent, shrivelled old woman of more than seventy years, her cheeks wrinkled and shrunken, her eyes rheumy, her voice thin and weak. She was very exhaustive on the state of her health, and testified to what a severe shaking she had had. She went over to Ethel for a closer admiration of the child. "And who is the little lady that came in to see a poor old woman?" she asked.

"She is the Doctor's little daughter, mother."

"And a nice little girl she is; as well she might be with such a father. Did you come in to see me, dear?"

"With Miss Turner," answered Ethel in a frightened voice.

"With Miss Turner! You make a pretty picture the pair of you. I might think she was your elder sister. I am grateful to you, little one, for coming in to see me; it does my heart good. I was once as young as you myself. Ay, but that is long ago! Will you give an old woman a kiss, dear?" She met Ethel's fair face with her lips, but at her touch a tremor went through the child,

Tears broke from her, and in very shame of her unmanners she cried the more.

Mrs Miller stood by alarmed. "Have I frightened her?" she said to Minnie.

The girl put her arms about the child. "I think it is because she is tired; she walked all the way from her place to the Red Hill. She doesn't go out much, and I suppose the strangeness of the house has upset her. Don't cry, Ethel dear!"

"We must get her a cup of tea; that will do her more good than anything if she is tired."

"We won't have time to wait, Mrs Miller," said Minnie. "I have to see her home, and it is past four o'clock now. But thank you very much."

"You had better wait a bit. Don't cry, my dear! Say you will have a cup of tea. Did I frighten you? Were you afraid of a poor old woman like me?"

Minnie rose from her chair. "Well, good-bye, Mrs Miller. Mother will be surprised and glad to know you are about again. I shall send her down to you to-morrow."

Ethel dried her eyes, but sank her ashamed glance, and Mrs Miller went with them to the door.

"I am sorry I have no flowers to give the little girl," she said. "But perhaps we can find a rose or two. Is she fond of flowers?"

"I like roses best," Ethel whispered.

"Well, we must get you some, dear, for I am very sorry for having frightened you. But I didn't think you would be afraid of a harmless old woman like me."

"I was a naughty girl to cry," Ethel ashamedly

confessed. "I hope you will forgive me—and I will kiss you now, if you like."

"You little darling!"

Ethel put her hands to the wrinkled face; tears were near the surface but she kept them back. Minnie looked on with feelings stirred by the simplicity of the picture, and its pathetic contrast of years.

"She nearly made me cry that time," Mrs. Miller confided to her.

"What did you cry for, Ethel?" Minnie asked when they were some distance on their way home.

"I don't know, Miss Turner. I didn't want to cry."

"Why did you do it then, dear?"

"I thought she was a witch. I didn't want to think so; but I did. And then I cried. But I am sorry for it now."

"You more than atoned for it, Ethel; it doesn't matter any more."

"Do all people get shrivelled up when they get old?" the child asked.

"Nearly all people. It isn't nice to think of, is it, dear?"

"But my grandma is not like her, and she is old."

"She is not nearly so old as Mrs. Miller. Your grandma is quite twenty years younger."

"And will my grandma's face get to be like Mrs. Miller's, then?"

"If she lives to be as old."

"And muma's as well?"

"Every one's, dear."

"Your mother's, too, Miss Turner?"

"Yes, my mother's too."

"And doesn't it make you want to cry?"

"It does indeed, Ethel."

"But why does God let people get shrivelled up? Perhaps it is only those who have done something wicked."

"Oh no, Ethel; you mustn't get hold of that idea. You must try to understand that although one's face may be shrivelled up, the soul is not. For instance, Miss Miller would be very much offended if you told her that her mother was ugly, because she thinks of her mother as the one who has always loved her, and taken care of her. You see, she knows her mother's goodness so well that she sees only that, and doesn't notice her looks. She sees the face of one she loves, but doesn't notice that it is ugly. And that is the way we must try to be. We must love people for their goodness, and not care whether they are good-looking or not."

"But if God liked He needn't shrivel people up," the child persisted. "Can't He make them look just as He likes?"

"People change, Ethel, by a process of nature. God doesn't interfere with that. You see He knows the goodness that is in every one that He doesn't care about looks, and that is the way He wants us to be." Her insistent sincerity stirred her own devotional feelings; and her view of life rose to a religious height that it seldom reached. She saw for a moment a cosmic universe, Heaven created, and her soul breathed within her. It seemed to her as if her mind had momentarily circled infinitude. But the feeling sank, leaving

her a deadened sense of loss. She was shut in by earth once more, bound in its shadow, her horizon narrowed to the limits of individual existence.

Ethel pondered her lesson until her introspective vision discovered the evil in herself. "Then it is wicked to be afraid of ugly people?" she said.

"It is wrong, dear, but not wicked exactly. It is in obedience to the laws of life that we grow old, and we must not question them."

When they reached the house it was nearly dusk; shadows of evening were closing the day. Mrs Hunter was on the veranda waiting for them. She took Minnie into her room, and stood by while the girl took off her hat and washed her hands.

Under sympathetic enquiries she had to enter into an explanation of the cause of her mysterious departure from Mrs Clarke's. She was successful in arousing no suspicion of Haddie's share in it all.

"And how did you enjoy yourself, Minnie?" she asked.

"Fairly well. As much as I expected."

"Did you dance after the rain?"

"Oh yes; we didn't mind the veranda being damp."

"And whom did you dance with?"

"Nearly every one, I think."

"With Fred most, I suppose."

"Now you are trying to be unkind."

"If you won't tell me anything I have to guess."

"Well, he has gone now—out of my life."

"One can never tell. He was to go this

morning, certainly. But even if he has gone, he may come back, you know."

They heard the arrival of Mr Hunter and his mother, and they went out on the veranda. Ethel presently followed them, bringing her grandmother with her.

The elder Mrs Hunter looked the portrait of a lovable old lady who had well accomplished the duties of motherhood. She had two sons, of whom Edgar was the younger. The other, a solicitor, like his father, was also married and settled down. She herself was still a wife, her husband living in Toowoomba. She was a woman of some breadth of mind if of little originality. Her pride in her sons was touchingly repaid by their regard for her.

It was a matter for some secret regret with her that she had been able to give them only moderate openings for worldly advancement. But at least she left them on the same social level on which she had lived, and that in a crowded world like this was a satisfactory, if not a very congratulatory, matter. Still she felt justified in the complaint that the world itself had done so little for them, that accident had not been kind. Others of far less sterling worth went higher. So that in feeling the superiority of her family and herself to those she daily mixed with, she had fallen into the habit of treating them with some want of consideration, as if they had no part in her real life. Her daughter-in-law was one of these. Marriage had been an opening for Edgar to improve his condition, but he had not profited by the opportunity. She acknowledged that fact without attaching the blame of it in her own mind to him. Neither did

she feel any active animosity towards his wife ; her vigorous pride saved her from that. But she could not do less than feel that his marriage had been a grave mistake—accident had been singularly unkind to him.

“ My little girl did get home again safely,” she said to Ethel.

“ Oh yes, grandma. I found the house the first try. I told you I knew the way.”

“ But it was rather far to send a little girl of your age. Don’t you think so, Miss Turner ? ”

Minnie was well aware of the antagonism between the two women. “ Well, perhaps, yes—to send a child of Ethel’s age, but not too far to send Ethel,” she said.

“ You seem to have quite the opinion of Ethel that her mother has.”

“ Yes. Mrs Hunter’s opinion and mine are very closely identified on most things.”

“ That must be very nice—for one of you.”

“ For us all,” Minnie insisted.

Alison beckoned Ethel aside, and put her arms about her in the wish to hide her pleased embarrassment at Minnie’s alert defence of her.

“ Did you enjoy yourself last night, Miss Turner ? ” asked Mrs Hunter.

“ Very much indeed.”

“ Kate was rather unfortunate in having to leave so early ; though I suppose it was mostly young people who were there ? ”

“ There were no old people, of course ; and it was very enjoyable.”

“ Old people would have felt out of place, I think. I know I should have.”

"But you ought to have been there to look after me," said Kate. "You wouldn't have felt out of place, then. You must go next time."

"It might be as well."

"Oh, it would, I assure you. It is the greatest pity that you were not there last night."

"Why, Kate?"

"You don't expect me to give you reasons?"

"Oh no, I don't expect much from you at any time. But it is a strange world!" she mused. "Don't you think so, Miss Turner?"

"I haven't had your experience of it," answered Minnie sweetly.

Alison laughed out, but Ethel buried her face in her mother's lap and cried.

"What is the matter?" asked the mother in alarm. She thought that the child must have felt the under-current of their conversation.

"Muma, you won't grow old, will you?" she sobbed.

"Won't grow old?" said the grandmother. "What does she mean?"

"I don't know," said Kate spiritedly. "I have no more idea than you have; unless it is that she doesn't want me to become like her grandmother."

"You mustn't grow old and get all shrivelled up," murmured Ethel.

"No, dear, I won't, if you will stop crying. 'Old and all shrivelled up,' what is she thinking of?"

"I am afraid I am responsible," said Minnie. "I took Ethel with me to see Miss Miller's mother. She must be more than seventy, and her appearance frightened Ethel."

"So that is it," said the grandmother. The intensity of her relief enabled her to see how real had been her fears. "She doesn't want you to become like Miss Miller's mother, Kate."

Kate's breathing came sharply; the whole world was against her—even Minnie. And yet it was almost justly so. Why had she so foolishly allowed her bitterness to master her? She felt the need of the woman's forgiveness yet could think she would be debased in accepting it.

At dinner the elder woman kept very quiet. To Kate it seemed that she was still undecided how to treat her. Evidently the wound had been deep. She tried to commend herself for its infliction, and, failing, tried to justify it.

Mr Hunter saw his mother's moodiness, and looked interrogatively at his wife. She resented his implication, and compressed her lips at a second glance. She felt that she had been condemned unheard.

After dinner the wish to escape one another's company drove the wife and mother to their rooms. Minnie was taken into the drawing-room by Ethel, and Mr Hunter followed them.

"I won't ask you to sing just at present, Miss Turner," he said.

"To save me the pain of declining."

"That sounds dreadfully conventional, doesn't it?" he answered with a smile.

"Do you disapprove of one's being conventional?"

"Of your being so."

"Why is that?"

SYMPATHY WITH A CHILD'S PROTEST 81

"Because you were never intended to be like every one else."

"Thank you very much."

"It is strange I never met you before," he went on. "I had heard a good deal of you. I knew you by sight. Shall I confess that I wanted to know you?"

"What did you hear about me?"

"Little enough now I think of it. Much less than is worth repeating."

"Well, whom did you hear it from?"

"I see you don't trust me very far. You have a suspicion that what I have heard begins and ends with myself."

"Oh, not in the least." She acknowledged her confusion with a blush. "But let us change the subject."

He was unwilling to quit such a congenial topic.
"It was from Clarke I heard, if you will know."

"From Fred?"

"No, Haddie."

"Fred went away to-day."

"Yes. I have always liked him the better of the two. There is less in him, perhaps, but what there is seems more genuine."

He was too ignorantly masculine to feel any significance in her lowered voice, or to notice her paled cheeks. "I have never taken much notice," she murmured.

"I am rather surprised at that. I should have thought it was your habit to have a pretty clear judgment of every one you meet."

"But scarcely of the people one grows up with," she protested. "One accepts them as one finds

them. To me there is a difference, though I don't know whether I am very intelligible about it."

"Oh, I understand you! But, of course, apart from that, it isn't fair of me to expect you to judge your friends. Having no friends myself has dulled my knowledge of the claims of friendship."

She was not unconscious that his implied estimate of the value of his friendship hinted at an offer of it to her. She could name to herself no exaggeration in his exalted attitude. "But I am afraid I am not very loyal—to any one, except in extreme cases," she said. She hoped her honesty would bring reward. In the difficulty of deciding what she definitely looked for, she reached the belief that his mere presence commanded her to reveal sincere aspects of herself.

"I won't blame you for that," he answered. "Constant loyalty, I suppose, must entail a sacrifice of the freedom of one's intelligence."

"Yes, of course it would. But for myself I don't think I have an opinion of any one that would wholly define my conception. People vary so much from day to day that it doesn't seem fair to have a fixed opinion of them, and to try all their moods by that."

"It is the better way."

"Oh no; you must so often be unjust to them. Suppose you hear of a generous act being done by a man whom you have always known to be selfish and cruel, if you judge him by his past record alone, you can only account for it all by saying there is some unworthy motive at the back. You see you are handicapped by your previous opinion from doing him justice now."

She noted eagerly the progress she made, and he carried her on, charmed by her animation. She felt that she was defending, justifying Haddie, yet she suffered from a sense of the unsubstantiality of it all. She detected the reason in the fact that, whatever the extent of her success, he would still harbour his unjust view of him. He would not understand what her inner purpose had been.

There was presently a knock at the door, and a high-pitched feminine enquiry: "Can I come in?"

Mr Hunter went to the passage. "Is it you, Mrs Clarke? Come in by all means."

"I came to ask if Mrs Hunter were better. I am so sorry she had to leave us last night, I would have been down earlier, but I have had no time." She ran to Minnie: "Are you better, dear—O Minnie, is it you? I thought you were Mrs Hunter. What a silly mistake! But coming from the dark into the light one can't see distinctly. Where is Mrs Hunter?"

"Ethel, run and knock at your mother's door. But sit down, Mrs Clarke."

"I haven't time to wait—I really haven't. Mrs Hunter and Minnie are not so much unlike in figure, are they?"

"Miss Turner is a little taller."

"Oh, I don't think so. Do you, Minnie?"

"I think I am."

"That is like you, to agree with the man. I don't believe you are; I'll compare you and see. My dear Mrs Hunter are you better?" she cried, as Kate came into the room.

"Oh yes, quite better. I suppose I gave you a

fright, running away without telling any one. I must apologise, now."

"It must have been a terrible experience for you — fainting all alone, and at an evening! Of course I wish you had told me you were going; I would have sent Haddie home with you. But I know it was only that you didn't want to disturb any one. So I'll forgive you this time, though I won't next. And you are sure you feel quite well now?"

"Why, look at me!" she said with a smiling pretence of pride.

"I don't think you look too well yet. Was it a fainting fit? And you are subject to them? They always do come on at the most awkward times. I knew a girl——" She decided that her reminiscence was somewhat inappropriate, and she turned to Mr Hunter: "You will have to cure her."

"Oh, I think we'll manage that," he answered.

"Sit down, Mrs Clarke," said Kate. "You are in no hurry."

"I can't stay a moment; Haddie is waiting for me outside. We are off to the concert. He wouldn't come in; he said I might hurry a little when I knew he was waiting."

"He should have come in, instead of waiting out there like a lost—something. Tell him I said so," said Mrs Hunter. Her eyes shot defiance; she looked at her husband, but finding nothing inimical to encounter there, they drooped. She struck away from her own sense of shame.

"I shall tell him all the nasty things you can think of," said Mrs Clarke. "But, no, I was forgetting, I must be very nice to him now that I have lost Fred. O Mrs Hunter, stand beside Minnie, back

to back. I want to see who is the taller. Your husband says Minnie is."

"And so she is," he protested when they stood together.

"There is very little difference—not worth insisting on," was Mrs Clarke's surrender. "I made such a mistake when I came in, Mrs Hunter; I mistook Minnie for you."

The wife's face paled momentarily as she asked: "Didn't Minnie object?"

"Object! Why should she? I daresay she was flattered, if she would confess."

"Mrs Clarke speaks for me; I was flattered," said the girl in gentle irony. She saw Alison's glance of injured reproach, but she felt that she did not care. Something within her seemed to have demanded that she should risk offending even him. But he gave her a smile of comradeship as his estimate of the enormity of her offence.

"Oh, I was quite forgetting Mr Hunter's mother! How is she?" said Mrs Clarke, as Mrs Hunter accompanied her down the passage.

"She is well. Shall I tell her you are here?"

"No, don't bother; it is too late. But tell her I was enquiring. And good-night!"

"Good-night! I hope you will enjoy the concert."

"I am sure we shall; it is going to be very good."

Mrs Hunter watched her go down the path, her heart beating tremulously in some new purpose. "You will tell Mr Clarke I think it was very wrong of him to stay outside," she said in a calling voice.

But memory awoke reproach. Her breath came and went in a shivering way, and hot tears threatened to subdue a rebel heart.

CHAPTER VIII

RECORDS THE SHABBIEST OF ADVENTURES

IT was at this time that she grew conscious of a mental advance. Her old narrow view of life could not stand against the new tests she tried it with ; she detected its artificiality. And her old faiths shattered, she saw now the falsity of all ideals. But proud as she was of her escape from life-long falsity, she could feel some regret in contemplating the self she was leaving behind. It had lived chiefly in an atmosphere of contentment. But life circling her, throbbing "to her touch, carried her on. It was essentially wise to escape to see life in its nakedness ; it would be criminal to attempt to re-bury herself within walls.

She sought discussion with her husband, but he evaded it. He would not help nor hinder her in her beliefs. She wondered at that when she remembered that he looked on life as the mysterious embodiment of nothing, as a purposeless thing that led nowhere.

She could not but encounter new thoughts on marriage when she applied his theory of life to their personal relations, and saw it dissolve them into mist. She saw, or thought she saw, how he must

view his whole existence as a succession of accidents — his marriage the greatest accident of all, and one that at times he must greatly regret. Indeed, it was inevitable that he must regret every act of his life. But in her feminine impulse to defend him against even her own accusations, she was strengthened in feeling there must also be times when he looked on his marriage as a refuge and anchorage from the driving currents of life. In acknowledging that human nature was a sum of contradiction, she felt that she could still cling to what was best in him.

It came to her suddenly, in a moment of exaltation, that it was not her fault, nor his, that Haddie loved her. She made the acknowledgment if not entirely without shame, yet with the feeling that shame was uncalled for. But she could not regret her disdainful treatment of him ; that belonged to her present self no less than to her past. He had said she had heard the last of it. She could now admire him on that side, and was vaguely distressed that he would never know she had been able to judge him justly.

She recognised very little danger in giving her thoughts free play ; she wished to go as far as they would carry her. The extent of her advance was that she could think she was not disloyal to her husband in giving them freedom. She saw that her horizon must not be empty of all but him. There were other facts in the world—lesser ones, of course ; but still she must not ignore them.

It was hard to part with much of the woman that was in her, to accept as natural the fact that a husband should cease to love. She debated

whether she would not gladly give up her new freedom to be an imprisoned bird again, shielded and sheltered by his love. The prospect had allurements, but the choice not being given her, she came to view them with lessening clearness.

Minnie was still her refuge ; she found her chief comfort in the girl. She tried her new ideas of life on her, and found Minnie more responsive than she had looked for, found that she had looked on the world with open eyes. But the need of saving her from her passion for Haddie was a weight on her heart. She saw no clear path, but only the urgency of finding one. In the hope of helping the girl, and drawing closer to her in a protective way, she asked to be made known to her parents.

Minnie was unaffectedly delighted. The request proved to her in the way she would have most preferred, that Alison was more attracted by intrinsic qualities in her, than by the outward ones with which she faced the world. For her parents, though of good education, and sterling qualities, were seldom much enquired after by her finer friends.

Minnie, with a free tongue on their virtues, was a new and pleasing phase to Alison. It appeared that her father was first in her thoughts. He read widely of serious books, played chess well, cared only for intellectual amusement, and detested the frivolous. She quoted from him, and revealed where her own vigorous qualities of mind came from.

In his affectionate daughter's eyes he was a fine-looking man, and had been good-looking in his younger days. But he was fifty-eight now, and his

hair was a grizzled white. She was his pet; he called her "Baby." He was the best father any one ever had.

She made complaint against the world that compelled him to work hard so late in life. That was not merely a filial sentiment; other men too she felt sorry for in the same way. His worth to the world was considerable even now; he had notable qualities, but he had never had opportunities. His life was a silent tragedy. The complaint was hers, not his.

In attempting to depict her mother, she struck the first sense of presumption in a daughter openly criticising her parents. She was clever enough to detect that the reason was in the fact, that while her sentiment towards her father was a passionate pride, her regard for her mother, with whom for the past few years she had been on a footing of comradeship, was on the basis of a knowledge of her worth, rather than from a daughter's worship. Her mother she saw on her own level her father was above them both.

"My mother!" she said. "I do not know how to give you a proper idea of her. She is wholly good. I cannot point to one thing more than another. I find it difficult to realise what exact impression a stranger would have of her. But you will like her very much; I am sure of that. We often talk about father, and she tells me of his younger days. She is proud of him, and looks up to him quite as much as I do."

She chose the first Sunday as a convenient day to have Alison come to see them. At her friend's suggestion she went home with her to dinner after

morning church—Sunday being the one day of the week when dinner was the mid-day meal. They were to walk back in the cool of the evening, and be in time for tea.

They decided on returning by a leisurely way round. It was when they had gone some distance that Mrs Hunter said suddenly: "Mrs Clarke was saying that she feels the loss of Fred very much. Haddie, it seems, is not so self-sacrificing."

"Well, we are not going to blame him for that; are we?" said Minnie.

"I don't know," she answered doubtfully.

"Oh, you are always willing to blame him; I have noticed that. But, Alison, I want to ask you something. You have not been talking to Mr Hunter about him—about him and me? If you have, I shall never forgive you."

"No, Minnie, of course I have not," she protested. "How could you think so? It is the last thing I would do."

"Well, he doesn't like Haddie. He was talking to me about him; and I thought afterwards for a moment that he must have known."

"He doesn't, dear. But I know he doesn't like Haddie."

"Then, I don't care if he doesn't. It is when I hear people talking against him that I feel as if—I feel—" She ended weakly: "I feel that he is better than they are."

"Well, of course, I don't really dislike him; I have only been pretending in a way. But still there are reasons. I am so afraid of your love for him, Minnie. All that a woman has, all that you have—And I am sure he does not deserve it. I find my-

self lying awake in the night, wishing it were not true."

The girl was strangely affected ; a flush of heat went through her, as if drying her blood. She could not speak though her lips moved as if in the effort. Her breathing came heavily, and she caught at her throat as if to lessen the pain.

"He is older than you, too," the woman continued. "And I am sure—Minnie, what is the matter?" she ended in alarm.

"You are keeping something from me!" said the girl hoarsely. "Tell me what it is!"

"Sit down on this log, dear ; you are ill."

"I feel faint," she confessed.

They sat together, the trees whispering to them. They had left the dusty road for a foot-track, and had reached the open bush. The evening sun sent lengthened shadows about them, deepening the sense of quiet rest.

"Tell me!" said Minnie looking into her face.

The woman weighed the expediency of telling ; the girl's questionable right to know what her husband did not. Why had she not been straightforward from the first and told both of them? But this very debating with herself was a solace to her mind. It seemed to show that although she had forgiven him, she had not yet forgiven herself. She was still undecided when Minnie broke out again.

"Tell me! You and he have been much together since the picnic. Tell me ; I insist!"

A suspicion that the girl guessed something of the truth shot her to a defenceless falsehood. She affected an airy manner in the utterance : "There is nothing to tell."

“That is not true.”

“Minnie!”

She cried out in her pain: “You force me to it
you do know something!”

She put her arms tenderly round the girl’s neck
“Minnie, will you be quiet?”

“Will you tell me?” she moaned.

“I will tell you everything if you promise to be
quiet.”

“I am quiet now,” she pleaded.

“Are you quiet enough to be told that you have
been very foolish, dear?”

“Alison, you are trying to deceive me!”

“I am not, Minnie. I know nothing to his
disadvantage.”

“Mr Hunter has been saying something then.
Do tell me, Alison, for I know there is no truth in
it. Every one hates him, I believe—my father too
among them—I don’t know why.”

“Your father, Minnie! What can be the
reason?”

“I won’t tell you. And anyway I don’t know.
There is no truth in it at all; such things never
are true. I love him; that ought to tell you there
is no truth in it. I could kill myself for love of
him—so there!”

“O Minnie, my darling, I wish you wouldn’t
talk so.”

“You wish! Who are you to tell me what I
should do? Why should I talk to you, and tell
you things that I scarcely tell myself? And you
too hate him. Much it matters to him! You can
hate me too if you like. And, of course, you will
now.”

"Minnie, I will not let you talk so. My poor dear girl!" She yielded to the woman's embrace, and in a flood of tears sank her head. Alison watched her tenderly, her own feelings in stormy whirl. "Minnie," she said softly. She caught a murmured broken acknowledgment. "We are friends again, are we not?"

There was a quick pressure of her fingers, and then a voice emerged: "Forgive me!"

"My dearest girl!"

Minnie recovered herself and looked at Alison with a saddened seriousness. "I have been very wicked."

"You must never say things like that again, Minnie."

"Never, never! And you do forgive me?"

"O Minnie, Minnie," she sighed, "you are dearer to me than you think."

"I am a very thoughtless girl—and bad-tempered, too."

They rose to continue their way, walking hand in hand like children. Their words ran on the lightest matters in their efforts to escape from remembrance of a recent emotion. The path travelled down to a gully, all but dry of water, and the trees grew close into the road. They were impressed by the majesty of silence, and then, in iconoclastic humour, they cooed loudly. Their childish mood carried them to laughter; the sound went echoing through the trees, note upon note.

"If Mrs Clarke could see you, Alison, she would be disgusted," said Minnie.

"She would call us a pair of tomboys."

"I shall hide if any one comes; won't you?"

"Here is some one now."

"Only a tramp. Oh, we won't hide from him."

A dirty individual, with matted hair and torn clothes, came down the path towards them. Minnie stood by to let him pass over the gully first, and Alison, partly afraid, came to her side. The tramp halted on the opposite side quite close to them.

"Good-day, ladies," he said.

"Good-day," Minnie answered.

"Who was you cooeein' to?"

"Not to you."

"Not to me! Well, I thought it was me." He voiced a drunken emphasis.

"Well, you were quite mistaken, you see," said Minnie. "Would you mind standing aside so that we can get over?"

"What'll you gimme?" he asked.

"Let us go back, Minnie," whispered Alison.

"This way is the shortest, and I am going this way," said the girl. She saw that the man was a mere dissipated burlesque copy of a ruffian, and her mind revolted at yielding to such an object. "Don't give him money," she cried, seeing Alison with her purse in her hand. "He will only drink it. He needs a flogging most."

"You gimme the purse, and I won't mind about her," he said to Alison.

Minnie snatched the purse from her, in the determination of saving her from that degree of weakness. "Keep close to me, Alison," she said. "I am not afraid of such an object. There isn't anything to be afraid of in him. Are you going to get out of the way?" she cried imperiously.

"You gimme the purse ; it's mine ! The lady was going to give it to me when you stole it from her. It's me you're robbin'." He grew excited at the prospect of losing what he had never had.

"Are you going to stand aside ?"

"You gimme my purse ! It ain't yours."

Minnie saw that he was afraid to resort to violence, and she decided on a compromise with her own haughty spirit to end the matter more quickly. "Come with me, Alison," she said, and took her hand. They went down the bank of the gully, and then ran across where it was dry, and branched out to meet the road. The tramp came hesitatingly towards them.

The girl was excited but she had no fear. She saw besottedness and cowardice indicated in his face, his undecided eyes, and shuffling walk. And Alison had gathered strength for an effort ; the fact was doubly welcome, supplementing, as it did, her contemptuous judgment of the man.

"Are you going to follow us ?" she called. "You had better ; and we'll send the police to meet you."

"You gimme my purse. Five shillin's, then, and I'll say nothin' about it."

"I'll give you a shilling—as an act of stupid benevolence. Keep back now ; don't come nearer or you won't get it. I am going to throw it." She sent it some distance past him, and taking Alison's hand they ran up the road.

"Here is Mr Clarke coming," said Mrs Hunter. "I am so glad." Yet she pondered on the admission, wondering whether it did not include more than she felt, and more than the circumstances demanded she should feel.

Haddie understood the scene at a glance. "What has he been doing?" he asked.

"He wanted money," said Minnie, "but we didn't give him any. At least I threw him a shilling, but he wanted the purse. It is Alison's."

"Was he trying to frighten you?"

"I wasn't doin' nothin'," said the tramp. "Don't you interfere with me."

"You have been doing nothing for a long time, judging by your appearance, you dirty scoundrel!"

"Well, that's my business."

"If you were clean enough, I would take some of the impudence out of you."

"You leave me alone. I'm not hurtin' anybody."

"Get out of this—as far away as you can—or I'll send the police to look for you."

They watched him go off amid the trees, and Haddie turned to them. "It doesn't seem as if he had succeeded in frightening you very much after all," he said.

Alison guessed at the background of admiration that evoked the remark, and willingly took herself off the pedestal he had set up. "He frightened me. I behaved like a coward; didn't I, Minnie?"

"You behaved very well. Here is your purse now. I owe you a shilling."

"Oh, what nonsense, Minnie!"

Haddie took his place between them, and they walked on. Mrs Hunter was careful to keep far out from him, finding her way on the grass beyond the wheel-ruts. He was not ignorant of her intention, and won some slight favour in her eyes by addressing himself to Minnie.

"How is it you have not been to Sunday-school?" he asked the girl.

"I have been giving myself a holiday."

"And your scholars, too?"

"Sir! I am sure they are all weeping at my absence."

"Imagine the scene!"

"It has been haunting me."

He confessed, on being questioned in his turn, that his object in this particular quarter was a business one. There had been some new development in one of the mines in which he was interested, and he was anxious to go down. Minnie voiced a half sincere condemnation of his Sunday desecration, and he made a spirited defence

"You are very quiet, Alison," said Minnie when he had left them.

"I am tired, dear."

"You have not got over your fright. I believe you are still thinking about that wretched tramp."

"I believe I was."

"I am sure you were—all the time, too. You didn't speak to Haddie once."

"But he never addressed me. I heard you two talking. I was thinking about you most of the time."

"I feel sure he thought he had offended you, and was racking his brains to know how."

"I don't think he troubled about my silence; in any case he would know the reason." In recognising the dual meaning of her words, she saw how far deceit had become an inevitable part of her life.

They reached Minnie's home, and Mrs Hunter was welcomed by the girl's mother. Mr Turner was called in from an easy-chair in the back-garden to be presented.

Mrs Hunter was glad to find that his appearance was almost identical with a preconceived notion. His features were strong and big, his back slightly bowed, his face indicative of mental power. She felt at a glance that he was a man of sterling qualities. Mrs Turner was less noteworthy in her eyes. She had a homely, smiling face, and, watching her, one readily encountered the conclusion that her manner had grown younger with the lessening care of children. She seemed to look up to her husband in the way of an elderly daughter, and was touchingly thoughtful of his needs.

Alison noticed, with a quaint thrill of pleasure, certain little mannerisms in the mother that Minnie also possessed. She wondered why she so much valued their discovery. The answer, that she wanted to feel that Minnie was wholly womanly, seemed idle and superfluous. She had an unformed consciousness, rather than a knowledge of the fact, that she did not wish Minnie to be too like her father. His quiet firmness and sturdy self-reliance were qualities she could much admire, except when she saw how much they debarred one from seeing into his heart.

She regarded with sympathetic feelings the arrangement of the little parlour. It all seemed to breathe of the quiet happiness of home. There was a small piano and a book-case in the room, together with an easy-chair and some horse-hair ones. On the centre table were photographs and flowers.

"We are very glad to have you," said Mrs Turner. "But you should have brought the little one as well. You have never seen the little girl, father. She is the dearest little thing imaginable."

"Why didn't you bring her, Baby?" said Mr Turner, speaking to Minnie.

"Mr Hunter wouldn't trust both his treasures to me at once," she answered.

"She is rather a big baby, this of ours," said Mr Turner to Mrs Hunter.

"Just a nice size, I think."

"Lizzie likes them younger," he said, looking towards his wife.

"Wait until you see her, father, and hear the quaint things she says. Such a well-mannered little woman she is, too. You must let her come to see me, Mrs Hunter, or I shall be sending some one to carry her off."

"Minnie can bring her any time you wish, Mrs Turner. I myself am very much flattered at the favourable impression she has made, and I know she will be glad to come. Just at present, she cannot understand how you can be Minnie's mother while Minnie is taller than you."

"The dear little thing! I was telling father about her visit here. Children make the world bright for us."

"We had quite an adventure on the way in," said Mrs Hunter. "We went for a walk round by the rifle-range, and a tramp stuck us up. I was going to give him my purse, but Minnie wouldn't let me. I was quite frightened, but she wasn't in the least."

"I would have been frightened enough if it had

been dark," said the girl. She was conscious of the confusion of feeling that prompted the utterance —a wish to shield Alison's timidity, and a protest against herself being glorified in an unfeminine aspect.

"But you came to no harm, the pair of you?" questioned Mr Turner.

"Mr Clarke came up and sent him off. But we could have done without his assistance. The man was afraid to attack us, and Minnie was so brave, that in very shame I had to summon a little courage, too."

"And you saved your purse?" said Mrs Turner.

"All but a shilling of it," said Minnie.

"You see what trousers will do for a man," said Mr Turner. "If you had dressed Clarke in a man's clothes, your tramp would have robbed you first, and probably you two afterwards."

Mrs Hunter had to laugh; she stole a glance at Minnie's flushed face.

"You say that of Mr Clarke, father, just because you don't like him," said the girl.

"And you never say things about the people you don't like—do you, Baby?"

"Oh, well, I inherit the bad habit from you, I suppose," she murmured.

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CHAPTER IX

ASSISTS AT THE PORTRAITURE OF A HERO

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M R TURNER walked home with Mrs Hunter early in the night. In the hope of being able to talk to him on various matters that she did not wish Minnie to hear, she refused to permit Minnie to accompany them.

She found her companion to be of much surer mental grasp than herself—a fact she freely accepted. He was a new embodiment in her world, and she wondered if in the days of her limited outlook she would have regarded him as a natural product. Here was a man who did manual labour, yet he was possessed of a clear intelligence. He was in daily contact with the harsh facts of existence, yet his conception of life—perhaps even partly because of that—compelled her admiration. In her earlier days she had looked on the man who worked with his hands as fixedly lower in life than those who did not. He worked because his horizon always included work, and life compensated by deadening his sensibilities.

But now she saw that all work had a noble side. She even conceived that manual labour tended to make men more honest and worthy. She did not

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think with Minnie that Mr Turner had been misplaced in the world, but rather that it had shaped him to an excellent model.

Her democratic spirit was a new force, and ran to extremes beyond his. She noted with a pained satisfaction his opposition to Haddie Clarke. She probed for the reason, but could discover nothing very definite. His dislike was revealed to be rather on the basis of the man's shallowness and self-sufficiency. She tried to openly acquiesce in his judgment, but was stopped by the feeling that she degraded herself.

They spoke of Minnie's future—of her marriage. But their ambitions for the girl were very different. He claimed that a good tradesman, of fair education, of moderate attainments and competence, was the most desirable husband for any girl in Minnie's position. But she, though conscious of the theoretical force of his contention, could see in it only a sacrifice of the girl. She said that Minnie was fitted for something much better than he wished to give her, and he wanted to know what better. He would not object to a gentlemanly occupation, only the man must be of good character, of moral worth, and men of that description were, in his experience, more common among the people of his own station than in any other. She objected silently to her new-risen conviction of the dignity of labour being employed against conceptions that she would not part with.

It seemed also that he thought it a mistake for Minnie to be very friendly with those above her position—a thing that he spoke of with some diffidence in his wish to save her feelings. Yet he

recognised a possible element of good in it. The girl would see the hollowness of the lives of most of such people, and, in a natural soul-longing to touch facts, would come back to the real teachings of earth. He regretted the impossibility of teaching Minnie, of her learning anything except by contact, but still he had every confidence that she would lead herself aright.

Her defence was that life could be as real on an upper plane as on a lower one, that the matter depended solely on the individuals. But she did not speak it, knowing that she was but answering fact with a proposition. She wondered how Minnie's love for Haddie could survive amid the atmosphere of home. She loved her father, and was very proud of the worth of his judgments, yet knew he had strong objections to the man. And she would not find encouragement in the mother. For she, even if she knew the facts, would, in spite of any secret motherly wish she might have, be compelled, in loyalty to her husband, to disown her. The whole unfavourable surroundings seemed to hint at the strength of the girl's passion. She saw little present help in the father towards saving Minnie, yet found comfort in regarding him as a force that the girl would ultimately have to reckon with.

In the background of her mind she defended Haddie from his aspersions. He spoke of him as shallow and self-satisfied, but the fact that his daughter—largely a type of himself—was in love with the man was a refutation. Mr Turner would have to alter his views when he discovered Minnie's infatuation. Plainly, his estimate was a prejudiced

one, or, at most, rested on insufficient knowledge of Haddie. She was quite satisfied that her attempts to uphold him to herself were merely from the wish to do justice to all, and not primarily intended to conquer the shadowy feeling of uneasiness that had dwelt with her.

Mr Turner took her as far as the gate, but excused himself from her invitation to go inside. She contented herself with saying that she would bring Mr Hunter to see him. She entered the house happy in spirit, and feeling home to be close to her heart. She found no one in the parlour, and saw no light in the surgery or Mrs Hunter's room ; she looked to see if Ethel were in bed, and, finding she was not, she went to her mother-in-law's room, but stood undecided. Not till she remembered that the servant would also be out, it being Sunday night, did she knock. She felt impelled more by the seeming necessity of completing her sense of desertion, than the hope of receiving an answer.

The fact that they had all gone to church, or for a walk, came as a blow. She lay down on the couch in the sitting-room in order to meditate on her loneliness. The house had been left open either to delude vagrant characters with the idea that the occupants were at home, or else for her, in the direct expectation that she would be home before them. She had been thinking the tenderest thoughts of home, and here were but empty rooms to welcome her. Her feelings sprang to reaction—she too would go out. But where could she go? Mrs Clarke would not be home from church ; it would be useless to run up there. It seemed to her now that she had all but insisted on Mr Turner's coming

in, and that he, in his excessive selfishness, had gone off, leaving her to fight dragon fears. She shattered her idol of him at a stroke. Did he think women ought to be like men, like himself—to be never afraid? And did he think that others ought to have the same opinion of people that he had? He was unjust to those above him socially; he was harsh and unbending. His strength was in his unyieldingness, not in his humanity.

Brooding on her defencelessness she grew more afraid, and finally expectant of seeing some fearful intruder walk into the house. But in a recovered spasm of courage she rose to explore the house in order to dismiss her fears. She found the passage door opening on the back veranda was closed. She threw it back—and saw plainly the figure of a man before her. She screamed and ran, and in her flight fell near the foot of the steps, cutting her arm on the gravel. She scrambled to her feet and ran outside the gate, crying in pity of herself. She felt the pangs of illimitable suffering; life tore at her heart for escape. It seemed to her that she was shrieking with pain.

Other than escape from the house she had no purpose, and not till she saw Haddie Clarke before her did she realise where she had run. "O Mr Clarke, I am so glad!" she panted. The sudden arrival at conscious safety unsteadied her, and she staggered forward. He put out his arm to save her.

"What is the matter?" he asked, scarcely recognising her condition.

"I am nearly dead with fright! That tramp we met—he is down there!"

"You are shivering," he said, in sympathetic alarm. He took her hand, and was stirred by the tremor that ran through it. The contact seemed to thrill him; love of her flamed in his blood. She had come to him in her need! He was honest enough to feel that it was blindly, but could not do less than feel a fervid fascination in the fact.

"He was on the veranda," she murmured. "I am sure it was the same man. He must have known where I lived. I suppose he saw I was frightened of him. And he must have watched the others go out and me come in."

"Was there no one at home but you?"

"No, and I had just come in. The house was left open. But what a mercy he wasn't in one of the rooms!"

"Where was he?"

"On the back veranda. I opened the door, and there he was coming towards me."

"I will go down and see if he is there still."

"You will not leave me!" She threw the appealing note of feminine dependency into her voice, and did not shrink from the echo of it. But it awakened her to an inward glance at him. She had thoughts born in the thin air of hysteria; she saw the dangerous position she put him in when she placed herself in his hands. But the blame was her husband's, not hers. He had thrown them together to prove them. He had suspicions of her, and was testing them. Such thoughts fired her sense of license. She would do as she willed, and justify herself to herself—not to him.

"We can go together, then," he said.

"I could not go! How can you ask me? I should die of fear on the way!"

"But some one must go."

She was faintly affirmative of his words, but refused to accept their imperative note. They went inside the house at her request, as she was determined on waiting there till some one came for her. She learned that Mrs Clarke was at church, and Maud, though at home, was asleep.

"Where is Mr Hunter?" he asked.

"Out for a walk, I think."

"At church, perhaps?"

"I don't know."

"And Ethel—is she out, too?"

"She must be with them; she is not in bed. Oh, it was cruel of them to leave me in the house alone!"

"Perhaps they didn't expect you back so early."

"They did. Why did they leave the house open?"

"That certainly looks as if they did," he mused.

"It was cruel!" she said with a shiver. "I suppose he will steal everything of value; but I don't care."

"I scarcely think he went to rob: he seemed such an incompetent scoundrel—if, of course, it is the same man."

"I feel sure it is. And I was just thinking about him too when I opened the door."

"You must have frightened him as well. He will think you ran for assistance. Most likely he has gone by now."

"Of course he has. I didn't think of that."

"Shall we go down?"

"No, no, I cannot! I'm too afraid!" She had sunk low enough to feel a satisfaction in confessing to excessive timidity.

"Well, I think you had better let me go."

"But it mightn't be safe. He might be there still, and armed." Her own fears seemed to justify her fears for him.

"You don't think I am afraid?"

"O Mr Clarke, don't leave me! Don't ask to! He might come here in your absence, and then——"

"I don't think that is likely. And it is a shame to let him have things all his own way down there—if he is there still."

"Well, whose fault is it? No one can blame me. They shouldn't have gone out. Don't you go! I'll faint if you do!" She felt a choking sensation in realising how far her present threat included a past forgiveness.

There was a silence that seemed no less necessary to him than her. "Do you feel better now?" he said at length.

"I feel safe here, and that is everything."

He pondered her words, but she was no longer in the mood to bear with silence. "Mr Turner came home with me, but he wouldn't come in, though I asked him."

He had to acquiesce in the feminine sense of injustice. "It is a pity he didn't."

"I suppose he would have laughed at the idea of my being afraid to sit in the house alone."

He could not sacrifice himself by upholding the reasonable side. "Very likely," he murmured.

"Do you know much of him?"

"I know him fairly well. He has been here a long time." The perplexing sense that he did not know how far her nervous excitement might mislead him, prompted him to direct her attention outside herself. "He is a fine character in his way," he continued. "He is one of the best mining managers on the field; he thoroughly understands his work. But he is sometimes very obstinate. Minnie is like him in many ways. I rather admire him as a man."

"He doesn't speak so enthusiastically of you," she stammered. She felt it only just that he should be warned—his open admiration had jarred upon her. She attempted to compare the qualities of the two men. The one before her, she felt, had the simpler, the nobler nature. A new feeling swept through her, thrilling her blood—a sense of being identified with him, of being made kindred by his love.

"I am not surprised," he said.

Much as her feminine mind could admire an heroic attitude, she could not let him suffer any approach to injustice. Her new-born belief in him placed him on a pedestal, but not quite at a height where aspersions could not reach. "How is that?" she asked.

"A business misunderstanding!" He had the man's instinct to refrain from disclosing particulars, but reflecting how much he might gain, he sacrificed his scruples. "He claims to have lost money through me—some instructions he says he gave me to buy certain scrip. I don't remember the instructions at all, but he is quite certain about them. Anyway, the scrip went up—he came to me

for the shares, and of course I hadn't them. Unfortunately, the amount involved was large."

His repressive tone fired her interest. She saw with a spark of jealousy how his being the means of retarding the day of Mr Turner's retirement from work bound him to Minnie. Pity touched her too at the thought of the man who, after working all his life, had missed fortune by a mere mistake—and that not his own. And he had kept the whole incident secret from even Minnie, which at least showed nobility of mind. In the very hope that her thoughts were extravagant, she asked : "How large?"

"Over six hundred pounds."

Her breathing showed relief. "Is that all?" she murmured.

"It is a good deal from our point of view."

"Of course it is—what was I thinking of. Six hundred pounds! It would have made a great difference to him. It seems a great pity."

Her interest in the matter excited him ; he felt how much she took his part. He plunged forward into minute details. "The unfortunate part of the whole affair was that I made money out of the same scrip. Naturally he thought I acted on his instructions, and kept the shares when I saw they were going to rise. The thing is done here often enough—of course it is nothing else than absolute robbery. I offered him half the amount, as I was willing to reckon the mistake half mine. I felt that I couldn't do more, and I might have done a good deal less. To this day I can't remember that he gave me any instructions ; I can't remember his ever speaking to me about this particular mine.

However, the offer was bad policy ; he thought that I had an uneasy conscience, and he declined it. But he said he would take it if I would admit that I acted on his instructions—if I would write myself a thief and a liar. I haven't forgiven him that yet—sorry as I am for him."

"And he has never changed his opinion about it—about you!"

"It was six years ago."

"I feel sorry for him—in more ways than one."

She felt that her fright was a thing of years past. She took a vagrant glance back at it to convince herself of her presence here.

"It is a wretched deplorable business altogether," he said. "I have often wished it could be undone. He has such fine qualities that I confess I would sooner he thought well of me than otherwise. As for the money, he could have the whole amount now. I could afford it now, if I couldn't then. But he wouldn't take it except on his own terms, and no one can expect me to bend to them."

"It seems a pity that he should be so obstinate. The poor old man!"

"Well, I can understand how he looks at it. I could even admire his obstinacy if it didn't concern me so closely. But, mind you, he has the best of it to this extent : he makes me feel that I have done him an injury. If I were less sensitive I suppose I wouldn't feel it so much. But there seems to be no middle course for either of us."

She would have been slow to admit that a wish to have him removed from Minnie's shadowy claim, prompted the utterance : "Isn't there any way?"

"None that I can see." His glance was a question.

"Nor I," she murmured.

"Of course in the case of accident—his death, or any thing of that kind—I could arrange, I could ease my conscience." He laughed lamely as he added: "You will think I am looking far ahead."

Soft, sympathetic eyes were turned on him. "I understand," she said.

"It seems strange to be going over all this with you. I have never spoken to any one about it before."

She could feel that the night was a strange one to her in more ways than she could name.

"There is one thing I admire about him," he continued. "Minnie doesn't know of it, nor Mrs Turner either, perhaps. At least I can't think they do. And that gives me the idea that he doesn't really think I swindled him. It is his pride holds him back. Perhaps he will come round eventually—things do straighten out, occasionally in this world."

There was little enough of pose in his attitude, not enough for unsuspecting eyes to detect. She saw only earnestness in him, and felt strangely allied with his position.

And this man loved her! That she could say so much without feeling ashamed or indignant was, she felt, a thing to congratulate herself upon. Her life had been spent so much among complex natures—her husband's, his mother's, and Minnie's—that simplicity came as a sharp and pleasurable relief. She was glad of the accident that had brought her here, and enabled her to gather a true

conception of him. She felt that it was truer than that of any one else, truer than Minnie's . even. And she sickened in horror of the injustice the world had done him.

She said at length, in a halting voice: "If it is his pride—if you offered it now—he may have changed; do you think he has?"

"Do you think it would be of any use?"

She turned her face from him. "It might."

"Would you offer it if you were in my place?"

Her conventional self threatened to revive in a view of where she stood, but the true woman in her was able to advance a timid "Yes."

"Then it is settled."

But instantly she saw that he would again be laid open to Mr Turner's unjust suspicion. "No, you must not," she said.

He questioned in surprise: "I am not to offer it?"

"It would be useless."

"Perhaps not." He was searching for the reason of her change of mind, and feared it was because she shrank from the feeling that she could influence him.

"It would not be fair to yourself; he would misinterpret it."

"One might risk that."

"Why should you?"

He accepted that point slowly, pondered it, and what it embodied—a tender regard for his welfare. He was no longer distasteful to her—she had accepted the fact that he loved her. But was she so unsophisticated as to look upon it as a heavenly passion that asked for nothing—as he had attempted

to convince her—as he himself had once been momentarily convinced it was.

“Mrs Clarke is late,” she said.

“It is certainly time church was out.”

“She will wonder what I am doing here.”

“She need not know——” He stopped awkwardly, and looked at her. He was so embarrassed that she went to his assistance.

“She would have been just as frightened; any woman would. Don’t you think so?”

“I do, indeed. And then I suppose you are more nervous after your other adventure with the real burglar.”

They were suddenly startled by a noise of running knocks on the door. “Oh, what is that?” she cried, turning frightenedly to him.

“Nothing that will hurt you,” he answered, his voice at a pitch that a sense of danger gave.

She stood up, helpless with fear, and his arm received her gently. She rested in his embrace—with some contradiction of feeling, but the shivering woman uppermost. The knocks came again, a louder repetition, and she clung the closer to him, murmuring: “What can it be?”

The door opened and they saw Maud, clothed in a night-dress, her impish face changing to simple demureness at the sight before her.

“What devil’s tricks are you at now!” cried Haddie excitedly. Mrs Hunter jumped from his arms, and stood—a guilty woman—looking aghast at the child.

“I didn’t know any one was here,” Maud answered, pretending to halt on the verge of tears.

"Was it you made that noise?"

"Some of it."

"Some of it!" he thundered. "What in Heaven's name do you mean? Who made the rest of it, then?"

"I don't know," she said, sobbing in her fear.

Childish tears touched the woman's feelings, though only conventionally. "Come to me, Maud," she said. But Maud stood obstinately still, and the woman shivered at her own interpretation of the child's refusal.

"What do you think you are doing?" said Haddie, descending to quietness; but the child stood silent. "I spoke to you, Maud," he added with careful distinctness.

"I didn't mean to do anything," she cried. "I woke up and heard you talking, and I thought it must be muma."

"Your mother is not home yet, so you had better go to bed again."

"I don't want to go to bed," she mumbled.

"But I want you to go." He stepped towards her, and with a scream she ran to Mrs Hunter, and hid herself in the woman's arms.

Her heart overflowed at having the child cling lovingly, trustingly, to her. She took Maud on her lap, and bent over her in a motherly way. Haddie stood by silently. Knowing he had no part with either, he attempted to feel a superiority to both. He nursed the thought of the woman having been in his arms, of having rested there, and saw in her present conduct a wish to blind her own remembrance of the fact, as well as the child's.

"Will you go to bed for me, Maud? I must be going home," said Mrs Hunter.

"I want to sit up for muma."

"She may be late."

"You wait till she comes, will you?"

"I can't, dear; I must go at once."

"Here she is now," said Maud, starting up at hearing a step.

Mrs Hunter looked at Haddie; it was an acknowledgment of their mutual guilt.

Mrs Clarke came into the room, and stood surprised. "What is my little girl doing out of bed? How do you do, Mrs Hunter? I didn't notice it was you. You weren't at church?"

"Not to-night. Maud has been wanting her muma."

"Crying, Maud? What has been the matter?"

"We are all full of timid fears to-night, I think," said Mrs Hunter. "I had to run up here because I found a burglar in my house."

"Really! A burglar? And were you at home by yourself?"

"I had just come in. When I went to the back veranda, there he was on the steps. I think my scream must have frightened him, but I ran as hard as I could." The consciousness of guilt gave her the uneasy feeling that her narrative suffered in convincing force by being airily delivered. It was cruel that her recovered spirits should themselves demand a reaction. She saw Maud staring at her, and felt in a sudden chill that the child did not believe her. She went on, more in the hope of converting Maud than of interesting Mrs Clarke.

"It was lucky for me Mr Clarke was at home. I don't know what I should have done if he had not been here. And I wouldn't let him go down to see. I wouldn't let him leave me. I was too much afraid. Wouldn't you have been?"

"I suppose I would. But you might have gone together."

"I could never have gone; I would have fainted on the way."

"But he may have rifled the house?"

"Mr Clarke thinks he would go without taking anything. He thinks I must have frightened him as much as he did me."

"Very likely; I am sure I hope so. But you seem destined for burglar adventures."

"Did you notice if Mr Hunter were at home as you were passing?"

"I came the other way. But they were at church—Mr Hunter, his mother, and Ethel. They must be home before this."

"But Maud doesn't believe anything about the burglar—do you, Maud?" she said, as she rose to go.

"Yes, I do," the child answered.

"Good-night then, dear," and she kissed her impulsively. "Don't be surprised if I come back," she said to Mrs Clarke. "I am not going in till I see some one moving about."

"Well, don't keep Haddie long. I am beginning to be nervous myself."

CHAPTER X

BRINGS A REPENTANT LOVER TO HIS ALLEGIANCE

FRED had duly written to Mrs Clarke that he had been well received by his uncle, and had been given a position in his office, but beyond that he sent no word of his progress. His return to Gympie within the month of his departure came as a sharp surprise. She noted the change that the few weeks had made in him, both in manner and appearance. He seemed to have grown much older, and she realised, in some indefinite way, that they could never be to one another what they had been in earlier days.

She soon had convincing support for that conviction in his attitude to her enquiries. He refused to say why he had come back. And beyond admitting that he did not expect to remain more than a few days, he gave her no information regarding his intentions. Indeed, his manner was sufficiently ungracious as to have given her the impression that he cherished some secret resentment against her, had not a complete sense of rectitude supported her.

Perhaps the chief alteration in him was a new-

born self-reliance. His little journey into the world had given him a wider outlook, and he shrank from a view of how bigoted and intolerant he had been in danger of becoming. He felt ashamed of his old deference to Mrs Clarke's prejudiced opinions. But though he blamed her much, he was honest enough to blame himself more. In his new liberalism of thought he fretted at remembrance of the injustice he had done in the world.

He found out from Mrs Clarke, though not without raising unformed suspicions in her mind, that choir practice was still held every Wednesday night at the church. He went out early after dinner on that evening, leaving her to some restless reflections on his purpose.

He remembered that in old days Minnie's almost invariable habit was to be late, but he did not choose to run the risk of missing her by any delay on his part. He met many people whom he knew, but he did not speak. He saw by backward glances that he was recognised, and was rather flattered at the talk to which his spectral re-appearance would give occasion. He went down towards Minnie's home, and stood waiting on the opposite side of the road. He had leisure for thought, for lover-like fancies of all that her lighted window seemed to hint at and conceal. Her momentary appearance in the doorway, as she passed out, came with the intensity of a thrilling relief.

He went to meet her, and saw her sudden start as she recognised him. "Good evening, Miss Turner," he said ceremoniously.

"Fred, is it you?"

"It is really me."

"Why are you back? I mean—don't you like Sydney?"

"I have come back for only a few days," he said.

She attempted to quit the ground of personal enquiries in the fear of seeming too closely interested in his intentions. But her suspicion of his purpose in meeting her was resolved to certainty when he asked her to go for a walk instead of attending choir practice.

She was awake to a conflict of her womanly nature. Assuredly she did not wish to listen to words of love from one for whom she had no regard. But against that was the itching remembrance of his unmanly affectation of superiority. Had not such ungenerous sentiment been the almost invariable keynote of his conduct to her?

It was some salve to her conscience to yield with every show of reluctance. She insisted that it was urgently necessary that she should go to practice, and surrendered only on his buoyant acceptance of the whole responsibility. They had not gone far before he found a seat, and proposed that they should sit for a while.

"But I am not tired," she said.

"Well, I am," he answered.

"You ought to be ashamed to admit it."

"I'll call you unkind if you talk like that."

"I don't care what you call me," she replied.

"Don't you, Minnie?" he said with sudden animation. "Well, do you know, I would like to call you something

one else can call you. So that I can think of you all the time when I am away."

She felt that loyalty to her own love for Haddie demanded that she should not listen to anything further, but she was capable of no firmer protest than a murmured utterance: "You will have other things to think of."

With an effort he beat back the passion of protest. "Darling! May I call you that?" he whispered.

There was a silence out of which her voice slowly emerged. "You will want that for some one else."

"O Minnie, Minnie, have pity!" he broke out. "I don't deserve it, I know. But you——" He caught her by the shoulders and held her gently. "I love you!" he whispered.

She stood frigidly in his mild embrace, looking out into far worlds. Her heart was beating wildly, but she gave the appearance of outward calm; emotion had made her powerless. She noted with idle unheedingness the scene around. At the back of them was a saw-mill, cavernously silent, and in front a field of grey sand. There was the whirring sound of the winding machinery of the mine just opposite, and the sudden stoppage as the cage came to the mouth of the shaft.

"I came back to tell you, darling—for no other reason," he continued. "I love you, I love you!"

"Oh, stop, stop!" she wailed. A hate of herself and him swept through her. She had senselessly degraded herself. Oh, why had she not known till it was too late how his words would shatter every feeling of self-respect! It was cruel that she

had not been warned, but had been permitted to choose her own foolish course. Why had she not realised till now that if she heard words of love from him, she would never hear them from Haddie!

His look was a pained alarm which softened as he felt her body quivering. He feared he had surprised her into unknown regions of the feminine, where thought and action were incongruous. "Minnie, darling, what is the matter?" he asked.

She sank her head and murmured: "I wish you hadn't come back."

"Do you really wish that?" he cried in dismay.

"Let me go!"

"You wish that I didn't love you!"

"Let me go, Fred!"

"It is because you have not forgiven me, Minnie, for that night before I left. I was mad, then. I did not know my own mind. But now I do; and I have come back to tell you."

"I wish you hadn't."

"O Minnie, you cannot be so hard. If you knew how I have suffered for it all—if you knew how I loved you, that would plead for me. I have thought of nothing but you all the time."

"Let us go back, Fred. You do not understand—"

"I love you, Minnie!"

"Have pity! I hate the words!" she flashed out impetuously.

"You hate me too, darling? It is but just that you should. I do not complain—for hate will turn to love."

"Never, never. It is not hate, but only—Fred, I will not explain; you have no just right to

know. I shall never hate you, but I could never love you."

"O Minnie, darling!" His dismay seemed to deepen at the echo of his words.

"I am sorry for you; I can truthfully say that much. But let us go home."

"Home! I have none!" he said in despair.

"You will make me cry, Fred."

"But, Minnie, what is the reason? You said you would not explain, but you must. Love like mine has a right to know." He received no answer, but was not the less convinced of the justice of his claim. "What is the reason?" he insisted. "Is it because you have not forgiven me?"

"There was never anything to forgive."

"Then, what is it that makes you hate me?" He was hopeful enough to think that an indignant protest against the extravagant accusation might hurry her into anger, and to subsequent tenderness.

"I do not hate you; I will not let you say so," she cried.

"But, Minnie, have you no pity? Must I go back without one word of hope?"

"I say again, I am sorry you came back at all," she answered crying.

"My life down there will be hateful!" he cried out despairingly. "I can never bear it! Tell me, Minnie, is there no hope? I will not go back till you do. You are not in love with some one else?" The inconsequence of the question impressed him with its cleverness; it had come to him with the force of an inspiration.

Justice and pride battled in her mind. The contrast between how little was due to him from

her, and how undeniable was his claim to the facts as a lover, left her too wide a field. She could reach to no decision. It was not till her thoughts were turned to the prompting that he had claims as Haddie's brother that she could compel herself to a halting utterance of: "I do not know." Then, in shame at deceit that led nowhere, and protected nothing, she nerved herself to the whispered feminine confession: "Yes, I suppose I am."

CHAPTER XI

MOVES IN THE CAUSE OF SISTERLY DUTY

MRS CLARKE made an early discovery of the reason that had brought Fred back. Certain facts were carried to her—his visit to the Red Hill on Wednesday evening, Minnie's absence from practice, and the presence of the two on the Crescent Road. Only such faint outline was given her, but she was competent to supply colours. She prided herself on making such a far guess at his purpose ; she was unconscious of how far the feeling that he had come back expressly to do something that would displease her had been of help. But his attempt to secure Minnie had evidently failed ; so much was apparent in his despondent manner.

When he left for Sydney at the end of the week, her mind recovered from a dead weight, and became free to act. But her sentiments were in confusion, and, indeed, in part contradiction. She was glad that the girl had refused him—not accepted was her phrase—and yet in perceiving his case she was indefinitely sorry for him. But she could not be less than glad for her own sake that she had not to accept Minnie as a sister.

But Minnie had declined the honour; that was the aspect of the matter that called for attention. It seemed incredible; it was indeed an insult to them all—perhaps especially to herself.

Her thoughts ran in a circle, spurred to activity by anger and uncharitableness. How explain the matter? What were the girl's reasons? She encountered many, but they all echoed of insufficiency or of mockery. She was confronted by a wall that defied her perspicacity.

She branched off with an inspiration—the girl did not want Fred, but Haddie! She had a faint fear that she was trying to delude herself, but once embarked on the idea, she was astonished how much there was to support it. Minnie had perpetually run after him, and she herself had foolishly looked on that fact as the natural outcome of an ingenuous admiration. To be near him had been the chief reason of her visits in older days. The design of capturing him had been hers from early girlhood. And now she was deluding Mrs Hunter; she was using her as a new instrument to accomplish her ends. She blamed herself for not suspecting it all before. But there was some satisfaction in contemplating how much the girl had thrown away for the sake of an ambition that could but result in disastrous failure.

In her kind consideration of other people she soon saw the need of letting Mrs Hunter know of the infamous use that was being made of her. The fear that Mrs Hunter would refuse to believe, set her travelling her grounds again, and so helped to better assure her of the certainty of it all. But

she met a pause in the thought that the woman might not be ignorant of Minnie's purpose. And the consciousness that there was some foundation for that belief seemed in very contradiction to threaten the completeness of the case against Minnie.

She set out, taking Maud with her, chiefly in a conscious value of the support of even a silent adherent, and partly in the wish to have a witness to Minnie's exposure. She opened on her business with a stupid formality.

"I have called to speak to you about Haddie, Mrs Hunter." She saw the pallor of the woman's face, and guessed that a conscience was at work. She was glad to have such early evidence of the truth of the worst she had feared.

"About Mr Clarke! I was not aware that I—— Has Maude been saying—— But what is it you want to say?"

"I want to ask you if you have any idea why he is here so often."

"Is he here often?" she said, her lips tightening.

"Well, perhaps not what one could call often, but still Minnie is generally here when he does drop in. Do you think that he comes to see her?"

"I have never thought of connecting the two. But you think——"

"Oh no, I don't," Mrs Clarke interposed. "I only want to know if you can tell me anything." Surely the woman could no longer be blind to the hinted suspicion that he was invited purposely to meet Minnie.

Mrs Hunter laughed lightly in relief from a

secret fear, and said: "I am afraid I cannot. I have not given the matter a thought."

It was evident that she was pretending to be superior to the preposterousness of the idea of Haddie's calling in the wish to see the girl. Indeed, the woman's own protection lay in that deceit. Mrs Clarke saw that she must relinquish exalted humour and descend to fact. "Well, do you think Minnie comes to you in the hope of seeing him?"

"I should think it a very doubtful method of seeing him—if, of course, that were her wish. Indeed, I have always thought that she came to see me."

"Oh yes, of course you would!"

"If she wanted to see Mr Clarke, wouldn't it be better to visit you?"

"Not when she knows that her visits would not be countenanced once I knew their object."

"Whereas here they would!" she said, accepting the inevitable inference. It was not until she saw how weak was her defence of herself that she realised that she had also partly exposed Minnie. And it was the discovery of such accidental disloyalty to the girl that gave her a sharp recognition of how near it had been her heart's secret purpose to be intentionally disloyal. In feverish fear of the unformed impulses of the worst that was in her, she summoned the aid of the best.

"I am sure I hope not," said Mrs Clarke.

"But it is ungenerous and unfair to ascribe such a motive to the girl—if, of course, you do ascribe it."

"I do, indeed!"

"You have grounds for doing so—more than their accidental meetings here?"

"I have good grounds."

Mrs Hunter looked at the staring eyes of Maud and in consideration of Minnie said: "Does Maud know of them?"

"Not yet."

"You intend that she shall?"

"I do not think they will do her harm."

"I am afraid that it was not from regard for her feelings that I spoke."

"Maud has never been too highly impressed with Minnie."

"Indeed!" The word was chilling, and identified the mother's prejudice as unreasoning as the child's.

Mrs Clarke sounded an excessive note, suitable only for her own sense of the supreme gravity of the situation. "I shall be sorry if we have to quarrel, Mrs Hunter, yet it seems—"

"I am sure I have no wish to quarrel, Mrs Clarke. I do not want to offend you. But Minnie is my friend and naturally—"

Mrs Clarke broke in forgivably: "And naturally you think the best of her. But you have not known her as long as I have."

"But still I feel that I know her very thoroughly. What is the reason of your sudden enmity against her?"

"I wish to protect my brother-in-law from her designs."

"I should think him very capable of taking care of himself."

"Oh, I have no fear. Indeed, the real reason I

came was to warn you ; to let you see the kind of girl she is. If I have failed in that——”

“Our opinions about her differ very widely. If you wish I can discourage Mr Clarke from coming here, but Minnie, of course, I will not.”

“You will know her as well as I do some day.”

“Do you wish me to speak to Mr Clarke?—in a guarded manner, of course. It would not be fair to Minnie to let him know the real facts.” The sentiment contained a hint of conduct for Mrs Clarke.

“I have no right to interfere with him, or to ask you to do so.”

“Then I can do nothing.”

“It is not really necessary. Her arts will not be successful with Haddie. My chief purpose was to warn you.”

“I am sure I thank you.”

They paused, looking across at each other. The discussion had caused heat, yet there had not been very much personal antagonism between them. Each had felt so secure in herself. The one rested in the satisfaction of an accomplished duty, and her sense of rectitude was not lessened by a mere misinterpretation of motive. The other had the comfort of feeling that she had successfully defended her friend.

Maud had behaved rather well ; she had sat listening with staring eyes till there had risen in her quite a new fear of Mrs Hunter. The woman ought to have succumbed to her mother's attack. Her triumph was contrary to tradition, and indeed to justice. For if her mother knew as much as she

did about her, if she were to tell her mother what she had seen, she would then be able to compel Mrs Hunter, in simple fear, to believe anything and everything of Minnie.

The child suffered in the sense of unjust defeat. She was mystified by Mrs Hunter. What she knew of her contrasted strangely with what she now saw. The woman ought to be ashamed to face anybody. Yet here she acted as if she knew nothing whatever about Haddie's movements or intentions. And she wondered why, in the present instance most of all, Mrs Hunter had no inclination to abuse Minnie.

Mrs Clarke saw that for her own sake it would be best to assume a little straightforwardness. She must speak of Fred's rejection even at the risk of having that regarded as her only motive for accusing Minnie. For the woman's first pride and delusion were in her Christian probity, and she saw that if Mrs Hunter received the information from some outside source, she would look upon her conduct as contemptible and false in the extreme.

"I suppose you know that Fred has gone back to Sydney?" she said.

"I did not know that he had gone, though I understood that he was not going to stay long. I didn't see him at all. He didn't come in to us."

"He went nowhere; I never saw any one so changed."

"Minnie was saying he was changed."

She could think the assistance offered her was ungenerous. "Did she say anything else?"

"In what way?"

"Why he had come back?"

"No—not exactly."

"Didn't she tell you that he offered himself to her?"

"She didn't tell me in words. But I accused her of it, and she practically confessed."

"How did you know?"

"It was mostly a guess."

"Do you know why she did not accept him?"

She paled before she answered: "I did not ask."

"There she is now," said Maud looking out of the window. "She is coming in."

"There is no need for you to go," said Mrs Hunter as Mrs Clarke rose.

"It is quite time. I have a good deal to do this afternoon."

Minnie's knock was answered with a call to come in. She saw at a glance that her arrival was sending Mrs Clarke away, and she smiled sweetly. Maud went over to her and took her hand.

"Come up to my place," said the child.

"Not to-day, dear."

"Oh, do come. I want you to make a new dress for my doll; you make such lovely ones."

"We were just talking about you, Minnie," said Mrs Clarke.

"Were you, indeed! May I hear it all over again?"

"From Mrs Hunter, Minnie. Good-bye; I feel that I am in the way."

"I am afraid that I am frightening you off?"

"Oh, not in the least."

"Will you come up after, Minnie?" said Maud.

"No, Maud, I really won't have time."

"Do come. You will be sorry if you don't."

"Come on, Maud; don't be delaying," said her mother.

When they were gone Mrs Hunter took Minnie into her room and recounted the whole interview. The girl was less disturbed than she had anticipated. She did not sink to any passionate condemnation of Mrs Clarke, but indulged in ironical sympathy with the woman's position. Mrs Hunter encountered the suspicion that she nursed the belief that if Haddie were awakened to Mrs Clarke's interference, he would fly in direct opposition to her wishes.

They heard the buggy entering the yard, and looking out saw Mr Hunter, his mother, and Ethel alighting. They went out on the veranda, where Mr Hunter presently joined them.

"You are home early, Edgar," said his wife.

"I must have felt that Miss Turner would be here," he said gaily.

"And you hurried home to find your worst fears realised," said the girl.

"Well, you are unkind. By-the-by, is it true that Fred Clarke is back from Sydney?"

"He was back, but he has gone again," said Mrs Hunter, willing to save Minnie the need of answering.

"He didn't stay long, then. It seems to have been a very mysterious visit; I didn't see him about at all. Did you see him, Miss Turner?"

"I met him once."

"You didn't, Kate?"

"No ; but I knew he was back. He stayed only four days, Mrs Clarke was saying."

"And how is Mrs Clarke getting on with only Haddie ? I don't think she finds him as manageable as Fred. What an ideal husband Fred would make, to be sure !"

"For an ideal woman—if we had one," said Minnie.

"You never did have my opinion of Fred. The other was always your favourite."

"Well, Mrs Hunter will side with me."

"I dare say ; but women are bad judges of men."

"Oh, she is not, and evidently never was."

"Really, Miss Turner, we can't listen to this."

"Ask her what she thinks herself," said the girl with a smile.

The elder Mrs Hunter joined them in company with Ethel. "What is it you are laughing at ?" she asked.

"They are saying things about me," said her son.

"My poor boy !"

"You pity him !" said Kate with unneeded emphasis.

"Every way, my dear."

The wife bit her lips, and the mother smiled. Hunter was in doubt whether to go or stay. He decided that leaving them was the best protest against their petty behaviour.

It was probably due more to his reflections on Minnie's compliments than to any contempt of domestic worries that shortly after they should hear his voice raised on a music-hall song. The mother smiled ; the fact of her son even knowing such a song amused her. It was as if she had

been brought to contemplate an aspect of him that was entirely new to her. Her immediate reflections on the many unknown phases of one's nature decided that her smile was quite as much at herself as at him.

"Edgar is getting to be quite frivolous." She added with a glance at Kate, "One might almost think he wasn't married."

The wife stood up angrily. "Surely you can forgive him that—if I can!" she said in a quivering voice.

The other would not accept her irritation as in any way justified. "Kate, you are a wonderful woman; I don't think you understand yourself."

"You are easy enough to understand."

"And alas! to misunderstand as well."

"It is very likely."

"Here is Mr Clarke. He doesn't want to see me; I will go in."

"Why don't you say what you mean?" Kate asked, challenging her own fears of the woman's suspicions.

"It can keep."

"I wonder at that."

"Come, Ethel, we will go inside."

"Go, Ethel, by all means."

Haddie shook hands with Mrs Hunter and Minnie. "I won't disturb you," he said. "Dr Faulkner asked me to leave this parcel for your husband as I was passing. It was left at my office. Is every one well?"

"Oh yes, we're all quite well," Mrs Hunter answered. "Why didn't you let me see Fred before he left?"

"I don't know what had come over him ; he scarcely moved out at all."

Minnie drew back and went leisurely into the house, thinking Alison might want the opportunity for a private word with him. She went to the sitting-room, and from there took a backward glance. She saw them about to part, and Haddie holding Mrs Hunter's hand as if unconsciously. Alison made no effort to withdraw it, until, looking behind into the house, she saw her, and snatched it from him.

But it was not until she found that Alison had not followed her, but had gone to her own room, that she felt overwhelmed at a glimpse of the appalling horror of life.

CHAPTER XII

SEEKS THE AID OF A CHILD IN DEVELOPING THE STORY

ON the following day it was Mrs Turner's pleasure to open her door to two young visitors. Towards Maud she was not much predisposed, though she had known her a long time. Indeed, the child's reputation, extending as it did chiefly in the directions of impudence, deceit, and mischief-making, made her somewhat of an alarming figure to most of her acquaintances. But in Ethel's company she seemed to be possessed for the moment of a quiet, engaging sweetness.

"You have come to see me, haven't you, dears?" she said to them.

"Yes, Mrs Turner," they answered in chorus.

"Sit down and make yourselves at home. Give me your hats, and a kiss from each of you."

Maud assumed an air of free independence, and conducted herself as a model for Ethel to copy, but the younger child was bashfully conscious of a want of confidence in herself.

"Minnie has gone out. I expect her back at any time. But of course you didn't come to see her, you came to see me."

"I came to see Minnie as well," said Maud. "I want to speak to her about something."

"Well, Ethel came to see me, didn't you, dear?"

"Yes, Mrs Turner."

It was after due enquiries regarding Ethel's parents that she addressed herself to Maud. "And how is your mother?" she asked.

"She has a headache to-day. She doesn't know I came with Ethel."

"Oh, doesn't she? You should have told her, she will be wondering what has become of you."

"But she wouldn't have let me come if I had told her."

"I think she would, Maud."

"Oh no, she wouldn't. I am quite sure she wouldn't. But of course you don't know why."

"Well don't ever come again without having asked her." She was disturbed by the child's aggressive behaviour, and chafed at the hopelessness of reproving the mother's narrowness in her. "Mind what I say, Maud," she emphasised. "Don't ever come again without your mother's permission. For I don't want disobedient little girls to come to see me, do I, Ethel?"

"No. It was wrong of her to come, wasn't it?"

"It was very wrong indeed."

"But I have to see Minnie," said Maud. "That is why I came."

"What have you to see Minnie about?"

"I am not going to tell any one but her."

"It must be very important, then."

"No one knows it but me. Ethel would like to know it, but I won't tell her."

"I never asked you to tell me," Ethel protested.

"But you would like to know all the same,"

"No, I wouldn't. I don't suppose it is anything much."

"Isn't it much! You can ask your mother about it."

"Does she know about it?"

"She was there."

"And was Minnie there?" asked Mrs Turner.

"No, Minnie wasn't. How could she be?"

"Who else was there?" She was conscious of the reproach of employing an artful interest in order to stimulate the child's sense of her importance. Only the feeling that the matter was absolutely trivial could justify her.

"Only Ethel's mother and Haddie," said Maud. "One Sunday night it was. But I won't tell you any more."

A dread suspicion flamed suddenly in Mrs Turner's mind. She looked with dismayed astonishment on Maud. "What terrible thing are you hinting at?" she murmured.

"You don't know about it, do you?"

"I just do. Come inside into my room. Ethel dear, stay where you are; we won't be any time." She closed the door after Maud, and stood with her back to it. "Now, what is it?" she said sternly.

Maud began to let her fears take command. "I won't tell you," she whimpered.

"You will have to."

"I won't! I just won't! Haddie would kill me if I did."

"Haddie would kill you, child!" she echoed. "Good Heavens, do you mean that they—one Sunday night, you said. Ethel's mother and

Haddie! What has Minnie to do with it, then? Tell me or I'll make it worse for you, Maud."

"I won't tell you! You can't touch me; you dare not!"

"Here is Minnie now, thank goodness!" she said as she heard a step. "Minnie, come in here!" she called.

"What is the matter, mother? And Maud, what has she been crying about?"

"She has something to tell you."

Minnie's heart answered quickly to the omens of the situation. "Something to tell me!" she whispered. "What can it be?"

"About as bad as you could hear," said the mother with despondent emphasis. She added fiercely: "If that child can be believed—if she is not a very devil——But it can't be true—my heart bleeds for that poor darling Ethel. It can't, it can't be true!"

"What is it?" said Minnie. "And what has Ethel to do with it?"

"Your fine friends have been tempting the divorce court."

"Mother!" Her heart stopped as if waiting for a blow. "My friends!" she murmured at length, more in obstinate loyalty than in doubt.

"Your Mrs Hunter and your Mr Haddie."

With a piteous outcry she staggered back. In a stricken way she stared at the tearful Maud, as if to find in the child a duplication of her own helplessness.

"Why don't you say it is false?" cried her mother. "You should know the woman; she is your friend."

But the girl, with the remembrance of what she had herself seen, with remembrance of the subsequent fact that even in Alison's presence she had found it impossible to rise superior to all doubts, was swept by a new significance of other things that had seemed exaggerated in the woman. She realised the chilling horror of it all with intensified reality. "Mother, it is true," she whispered hoarsely.

"It is not! How can that child have such a mother? I say it is not true! Do you hear me!"

"But it is!" she wailed. "I feel that it is!" In her frantic despair her whole glance was inward. "Was any one ever so punished as I am?" she murmured.

"How long have you known, then?" asked her mother.

"I never knew; only I feel now—O mother pity me for I wish I were dead!"

"I am served aright for not listening to your father. He warned me of letting you find your friends among these people."

"I wish I had died at her age!" She pointed to Maud, unconscious of the exaggerated theatricality of her action.

"Her age! What is her age? She seems like a devil to me!"

Maud broke out into fresh sobs, which brought Mrs Turner down upon her. "Stop your crying; we have had enough of that. There are tears for your elders in this. Tell me all you know at once—and truthfully, too."

"Haddie would kill me!" she said, looking up at Minnie for protection.

“Who is going to tell Haddie?” cried Mrs Turner.
“You came to tell Minnie—tell her now.”

“But I don’t want to tell you.”

“But I want to hear; and I am going to hear.
It was on Sunday night, you were saying. What
did you see?”

“I saw them kissing.”

“You are sure of that? You are sure it was
she?”

“Ethel’s mother?” she questioned. “Of course
it was; I saw them in the room.”

“Well, tell me all about it. Where did it
happen?”

“In the parlour.”

“Go on, go on! How was it you saw them?”

“I heard them talking, then I got up to see who
it was, and I saw them.”

“This was at your house, then?”

“Yes, at our place. Sunday night. I was in
bed.”

“And you are sure you saw them?”

“Haddie had his arms round her, and she
screamed out when she saw me. I thought
Haddie was going to beat me, but he didn’t.
Ethel’s mother——”

“Call her Mrs Hunter; don’t call her Ethel’s
mother!” said the woman fiercely.

Maud accepted the correction; in her frightened
state she was not surprised at seemingly un-
reasoning passion. But she gained some quietness
of mind as her narrative progressed. “Mrs Hunter
took me up and petted me till muma came
home.”

“Till your muma came home! That looks

strange. And yet, of course, it was the best thing they could do—to brave it out! You were the only one at home, then, besides Haddie?"

"Yes; no one saw them but me."

"It is a good deal to be proud of. And is this the only time that you have seen them?"

"Yes, that's all."

"And how long ago was it? Last Sunday?"

"It was three weeks next Sunday."

"And you have kept it to yourself all this time?" Mrs Turner exclaimed in astonishment.

"I haven't told any one but you. And I don't know what Haddie would do to me if he knew I had told you."

"You haven't told your mother, then?" She seemed to feel that the weight of it had preyed on the child's mind, until, forced to confide in some one, she had chosen a quarter where it could do least harm.

"No, I haven't; I was too frightened she would say something to Haddie," said the child. "And you won't tell him, will you? He'll beat me with his whip if you do."

"Haddie won't know. But don't you tell any one either—not even your mother—without seeing me. Now, mind what I have said. But you are a strange child. I don't understand you, and I feel that it is no use trying."

"I won't tell any one; you needn't think I will. I would never have wanted to tell Minnie, only for Fred."

"What has Fred to do with it? Did you tell him?"

"No, of course I didn't. But I want Minnie to marry Fred."

"You want Minnie to marry Fred! What new mystery is this?"

"Fred is in love with her, and she won't have him. And I thought she would when I told her about Haddie."

Minnie lowered her eyes at her mother's gaze. "This is something new, Minnie," said the woman coldly.

Her tears came at last. "Mother, don't turn against me! I can't bear it!" she cried.

"Is this what Fred came back for?"

"I don't—yes."

"And you thought your mother didn't deserve to be told?"

"I didn't tell you because—because I thought it didn't matter."

"O Minnie, speak the truth!"

"It is true. I detest him! I would sooner die than marry him!"

"Did you tell no one?"

"No." Jesuistically she cleared herself with regard to Alison, who knew without being told. "Maud heard it from her mother. She went down to Mrs Hunter to try to induce her to drop me by saying I was running after Haddie, and only making use of her."

"Your fine friends are a very select lot, Minnie."

"Mrs Clarke was never any friend of mine."

"It will teach you a lesson. You will be guided by your father in future."

"I wish I had always been," she said miserably.

It was the childish imperfection of Maud's narrative that seemed to invest it with a decisive air of truth. Minnie found it but become in-

creasingly convincing the more she contemplated it.

The first hint of a secret footing between Alison and Haddie had been given her only the night before. But she had been able to regard it chiefly in relation to possibilities rather than to accomplished fact. She saw it principally as affecting herself, and not as weighty enough to affect Alison's life. She had defended Alison against her own thoughts, if not with fullest success, yet with some degree of satisfaction. She had tried to believe the woman innocent, she had told herself it was all a mistake—either hers or theirs—it mattered little which.

The girl knew she was by nature suspicious and credulous of evil, but in spite of that self-knowledge she could summon no real doubt of Alison's guilt. Looking back on her intercourse with the woman, she found clamorous evidence to support that view; and many things in her conduct that had before seemed mysterious were now made plain. She wondered only that she had so long been blind to all that was passing before her.

But Alison would never sacrifice herself much as she might be in love with him. Her wifehood would be an impregnable protection of her honour. Her future was safe in her own hands; it was impossible for any one who had known her to doubt that. The girl found that she had still the strongest faith in the woman's intrinsic goodness. Her trust had been so great as to make the total immediate shattering of it seem appalling.

But she must regard Haddie as base and black-hearted. To a sensitive girlish mind that impera-

She began to again review her relations with Haddie. She found nothing to blush for. She could not blame herself for his love ; she had never encouraged him. Not even in that night she had run to him was there anything to regret.

She could see that a hate of being driven by impelling forces would at times exalt her to face them, but she did not see how far a confidence in her own integrity was absolutely necessary to encourage her forward here. In a less defiant mood she might have thought more of danger, but now in recognising her present guiltlessness she felt the right to go even further, and still be innocent.

She found on Sunday morning that she was wholly indisposed for church, and she went for a walk instead. She had gone some distance, when, at a turn of the road, she encountered Minnie. The conviction that it was an identity of impulse that had made them indifferent to the church service led her to some forgiveness of the girl. Plainly Minnie was not confident of her guilt, but was rather endeavouring to face the task of reconciling impossibilities.

“ How is it that you have not been to see me, Minnie ? ” she asked.

“ I am not coming any more,” said the girl, looking down.

“ What is the reason of that ? ”

“ You know as well as I do,” she answered in a voice that quivered.

“ Minnie, do you really believe that I am unworthy of your friendship ? ”

“ My friendship ! ” There was an ironical sneer in her voice.

CHAPTER XIII

NOTES THE EFFECT OF A REVISION OF CAUSE

MRS HUNTER heard from Ethel some account of her visit to Mrs Turner. The child's return under the woman's protection, and the injunction not to have anything to do with Maud, gave a single keynote to speculation. She pierced the mystery of it without much effort. Yet she at first felt no uneasiness in regard to Minnie. The girl would come to her in a day or two. She could then get full particulars of Maud's disclosure, and—though that would scarcely be necessary—right herself in Minnie's eyes.

Yet, in contemplation of Maud's share in it, she met a check. It would seem that the child had not told her mother, but in devilish design had chosen to tell Minnie, the one who herself was in love with Haddie. But the more alarming part was the child's delay in disclosing all she knew. The mystery of that seemed to hint at fateful issues. She waited till the end of the week but Minnie made no sign. Her thoughts were in confusion. She shrank from the picture of herself that the girl's desertion portrayed, and it seemed to her a supreme effort to calmly accept her position.

tive view was almost impossible.. She could have cried at the torturing effort it entailed. Excuse for him she had none. Remembrance of past phases of him, of how completely the veneer of social customs had hidden his natural depravity, was but a faint voice in his favour. The spirit of sisterhood demanded scornful loathing of the man who could attempt to turn the affections of a wife.

But she wondered why her love for him had so completely died within her without protest. It had not risen up in even the shadow of defence of him. Her whole regard for him was gone—the last spark blown out. And though she recognised what heart-ache she was saved, she was a little ashamed of her changefulness. She contrasted her old estimate of the destiny of unrequited love with the present termination of it, and she could but smile sadly at contemplation of the issues she had escaped.

"Of any one's, then?" She was unanswered and went on: "O Minnie, Minnie, have you so little faith in me?"

The appeal thrilled the girl's blood, and though she recognised the injustice of making her the culprit she answered: "If you say it is not true—" and halted there.

"Is it needful to say it to you?" Alison reproached.

Through Minnie's blood ran remembrance of the reasons she had for believing it, ran remembrance of having believed it. Weighed against such things Alison's words were but a useless quibble. But in the woman's presence she could not believe her guilty, quite at the same time that she could not think she had so far misled herself as to have believed what had no basis in truth. But in the face of what she knew, Alison was asking too much in insisting that she should believe wholly in her innocence before she asserted it, and she answered clearly, "Yes."

She saw how deeply she had struck in the woman's recoil, but she stood obdurate. It was only because she was a girl that Alison dared treat her so—as if she were the most manageable of her sex.

Her attitude was fatal to reconciliation. To Mrs Hunter she was now only too intelligible. Blinded by her love for Haddie she was incapable of any generous feelings, of even commonly honest ones. The girl knew now in what way he was lost to her—and her resentment was against the one who was not to blame. She could pity the girl's position in that she had opened her heart to

one whom circumstances had compelled to appear treacherous, but she could also despise the meanness of mind that had so little trust in a fellow-woman.

“Minnie, are we to part?” she said.

“Yes, of course that will be best.”

“And you are going to believe all the iniquitous things that you can of me?”

“If you say——”

“No, I will not—not to you.”

“Of course not. Indeed, I ought to ask your pardon for thinking——”

“Minnie, you do not believe it! You do not believe one word of it!”

“You have not denied it.”

“Don’t you feel that you degrade yourself by speaking so?”

“Not in the least.”

“You believe Maud, then, though you know that the child is the very essence of falsehood?”

“Until you deny what she has said.”

“Deny it! What is there to deny? I was there at the house that night; I do not deny that. But it was only by an accident. More I will not tell you now. Anything more your heart denies for me.”

The simple directness of the woman’s manner was to Minnie a convincing proof of innocence. But she was dismayed at the necessity of deserting a belief that had before seemed every way justified. “I do not understand it all,” she faltered.

“Minnie, will you come home with me?” Alison asked. “There is so much I want to tell you.”

But the girl felt how impossible it was that

they could ever return to their old footing. The consciousness that hers would be the humble part in the reunion, in remembrance of her infamous distrust, withheld her. Yet she saw how much she lost by denying herself Alison's forgiveness, and in an indefinite way felt that her abnegation was a sufficient punishment. "I cannot!" she said.

"Come, Minnie, you must."

Such mild imperative carried the girl out of all wavering. "I promised my father never to visit you again, and I will not," she answered. "It is because of the difference in our social positions, that is all."

"But, Minnie, when he knows how much I want you he will let you come," Alison insisted.

"But I do not want to go."

"You can desert me like this, Minnie?"

"It is not that," she said. "I would come if I could, you know that."

"Think Minnie, of all that it means. It is not fair to either of us. You will come?"

"Never any more," she murmured.

"When your father consents, you will?"

"No, it is all past, and, besides, he will not consent. I can never go again, but I shall always think of you, and of how much I owe you." After her black distrust of the woman it seemed absolutely necessary to sound an exaggerated note of indebtedness as some crude reparation. "But I can never visit you again. It is because I owe that obedience to my father. There is no other reason." Her insistence on a belief in Alison's complete innocence sounded very childish in her own ears. But how often must she insist in that

way, and in every way, before she could blot out the fact that she had doubted her!

Alison sadly accepted the unyieldingness of the girl's determination. But she had not gone far before she heard a faint call on her name.

"There is something I didn't tell you," said Minnie with nervous quickness. "I want you to know—but I don't know how to say it. I was a silly girl then—I mean about him. But I am older now and it is all past. I do not care for him any more—in that way. It seemed to go at once—just like it came. I thought you ought to know. And I am ever so much happier now." The immodesty of her utterance thundered in her ears. A pang of torturing pain swept through her. She felt now that she had not less degraded her sex collectively in the past, when she had confessed her love, than she here defiled herself in denying it.

"Will you come to see me to-morrow, Minnie? We have so much to talk over."

"Oh, I cannot, for all sorts of reasons I cannot."

She left the girl, and went off up the road, but soon revolted against a straight course home. Her mind, sickened with remembrance of what she had been through, sank to reaction. She had been compelled to defend herself against the accusation of one to whom she had before opened her whole heart. The consciousness that she had met with comparatively easy success did not help her in the least. Her spirit was bemired and could not but droop.

Reflecting on Minnie, she saw the vanity of all friendships, and indeed of life wholly. She was tired of hers, as tired as any one could be. And

there seemed to be little or no justification for her existence. Other people were identified with the world through their relations, but she stood utterly alone. She had even failed in retaining one girl's friendship. She had pleaded for it, and had been refused. And to feel that it was not really worth retaining was but to heighten her failure in her own eyes.

It would almost seem as if she were pursued by an evil fate. Her peace of mind was dependent on the whim of an impish child. She did not know how soon she would again have to undergo the degradation that had been hers to-day. Her heart sighed for a refuge from her wretchedness.

The appearance of Haddie, some distance ahead, seemed but an answer to her thoughts, and she accepted it with quiet defiance of feminine fears. But a moment later instead of being wholly pleased by such an answer of fate, she challenged it. She would make one more struggle to guide herself. And it was at some distance from the doctrine of destiny that she encountered the thought that he had come out purposely to meet her.

She consented to his company at his request, and they turned their steps towards home through the bushes. He was plainly in a mood of gaiety, and he endeavoured to make her responsive. "You are very quiet," he said, acknowledging the failure of his effort.

"You wouldn't wonder at that if you knew," she answered with a sigh of despair.

"What has happened?" he asked softly as he came close to her.

“Nothing.”

“Am I to blame?”

She nodded a short affirmative, yet could wonder where her mood was hurrying her.

“What can I do?” he asked.

“Nothing.”

Her very nearness to him fired his blood, and her lowered eyes and bended neck seemed to urge him to break through all bonds and comfort her. He felt that she was at heart closer to him than he had any tangible reason for crediting. “I will do anything,” he said.

“I want nothing—but to see the end of my miserable life.”

She uttered a crying little sob as she felt his arm around her. “My darling! my darling!” he murmured.

“You love me still?” The words were swept from her on the wave of a sob; she shrank from herself at the echo of them.

“Always and ever—while life lasts!”

But at the touch of his lips she struggled in his arms and he let her free. She stood nervously twitching at the tassel of her parasol, and he, bewildered by her sudden change, stood mute.

“Go home, I entreat you!” she said crying.

“I wish you had never seen me,” he answered.

He saw there was an echo of that sentiment in her mind. She turned and went back the way they had come, so as not to have to pass him. But at a short distance he saw her put her hands to her face and sink weakly on a log that was near. He hurried to her, and stood silently there, listening to her sobs.

EFFECT OF A REVISION OF CAUSE 155

"I can leave Gympie to-morrow—or a week at the latest," he said.

She was dismayed at the thought of taking the responsibility of such a change in his life. "It is not that," she answered brokenly. "I am crying because—because I am so tired."

CHAPTER XIV

SEES PASSION SUPREME OVER ALL

IT was chiefly the fact of having met with no difficulty in convincing Minnie of her innocence that enabled her to subsequently accept with dull resignation her cheerless isolation. The girl was after all justified in sacrificing everything for the purpose of drawing nearer to her father. And it was also natural that, being no longer at the sway of love for Haddie, she could give up a friendship that on her side had been cemented by that. For she had not even a spark of doubt that Minnie had ceased to love him. She recognised that such change in the girl was due to unjust suspicions of Haddie and herself, and she wondered how far she would have consented to be misjudged for the sake of this end being attained. Assuredly Minnie would be happier now that she was free of that girlish passion.

It was one evening, as she was walking in the garden, that she found her first opportunity of speaking to Maud. The child was searching for fruit in the passion vines that clustered on the fence dividing Mrs Clarke's garden from her own. The evening was lost in night, and the moon, high in the heavens, shone brightly down.

"Is that you, Maud?" she said sharply.

"Yes, it's me," answered the child ungraciously.

"Come here; I want to speak to you."

"What do you want?" said Maud, reluctantly standing out so that she could be seen.

"What stories have you been telling people about me?"

"Me! I haven't said anything about you."

"You have. Do you never tell the truth, child? What did you tell Minnie Turner?"

"I never told her anything."

"Now, understand me, Maud, I know all about it; but I want to know from you what you told her."

"I didn't tell her anything. I know who told you I did. It was Ethel."

"If you don't tell me at once I'll take you down to the police magistrate, and we shall see what he can do," said Mrs Hunter threateningly.

"I never said anything," answered Maud whimpering.

"You are a little wretch! You couldn't tell the truth if you tried. But, never mind, I shall see the police magistrate to-morrow, and he'll order you a whipping."

"He won't whip me!"

"We'll see all about that to-morrow."

"Muma won't let him."

"I'll speak to your mother about you the first opportunity, and to Haddie, too. Here he comes now."

Maud took a frightened glance at the approaching figure. She ran crying down the garden, and then skirted up to the house,

"What is the matter?" asked Haddie, going down to where the child had stood.

"I have been speaking to Maud."

"What has she been doing?"

"She has been telling Minnie all sorts of falsehoods."

He had a definite suspicion of what was hinted at. "She is a little fiend!" he said. "She seems to do nothing else but make mischief."

"Perhaps it is not so serious after all in this case," she murmured. "Of course Minnie doesn't believe—but I don't think I understand the child in the least."

"I'll swear I do; and more than that, I think she understands me."

"I know she fears you. I suppose you are cruel to her."

"Surely you are not going to defend her."

She felt that she was doing wrong in standing here with him in the soft moonlight. Or was it that a consciousness of earlier guilt had made her supersensitive of decorum, enabling her to see in the accident of this meeting what no one else would. "I think I'll go up to see Mrs Clarke," she said.

She went down towards a gap in the fence that was used by Maud and Ethel as a means of communication, and passed through.

"And what are you going to do with me?" he asked, as he came to her side.

"I don't want you at all. You had better go down to see Mr Hunter."

He detected in the glance she gave him some encouragement to recklessness. "I don't think

I shall let you go up," he said, putting his arm round her.

"Please, Mr Clarke, don't."

"Is it very wrong?"

"Oh, you know it is." She caught at his hand to free herself. "Let me go!"

"If you say you forgive me."

"I will call somebody—Mrs Clarke."

"Why not Maud?"

In a clearly honest wish to escape from his embrace she tried to stumble forward. But he was too quick, and, catching her, he held her in his arms and kissed her.

She jumped clear of him, and looked back in pretended angry protest. She revelled in the excitement of her blood. Her conduct was wholly wrong and indefensible, yet she could not condemn herself. His love was one of the facts of her existence quite as much as was the death of her husband's. For neither fact was she responsible; life had decided these matters without help from her. She had years before her in which to atone for her present sinfulness, and with that consciousness before her she had no real wish to repulse him. For her confident belief was that she was safe, even in his arms. The fact that he loved her seemed in itself to emphasise that. And she consciously felt, more than definitely admitted, that his regard was a stronger bulwark of her virtue than any reserve of moral force that she in her excitement possessed.

"Go and see if Mrs Clarke is inside," she said. "I am going to sit down." She went round to the front of a little arbour close by, and took a seat.

He knew that she was playing with temptation. Her blood was in revolt, and she could not force herself to the path she knew was right. In a helpless feminine mood she left decision to him. Her going into the arbour was an invitation to follow; her request to see if Mrs Clarke were at home was made to show him the more seemly course. And if he acted on that, she would run home in his absence.

He followed and stood before her. "I am going to sit down as well," he said.

"You shall not!"

She made an attempt to escape, but he seized her in his arms. "I love you, I love you!" he murmured, as he kissed her.

It was with some faint surprise at herself that she yielded to the rapture of his embracing arms. The warmth of his passion seemed to have made her powerless.

"I love you more than anything else in life!" he said.

"No, no!" she murmured. Ideas of right and wrong surged confusedly in her brain. She could not lift herself to any decision. She had no conscious wish to escape, and felt that she could not.

"But I do—you know that I do," he insisted. "I love you passionately—madly!" He showered her lips with kisses.

She had sunk back, and lay seemingly inert in his arms. She was silent in gathering strength to speak. "We are both mad, I think," she whispered.

There was a quivering note of abandonment in her voice.

CHAPTER XV

DEALS WITH AN ERA OF REPENTANCE

PLUNGED in the deepest depths of despair she lay ill, looking longingly to the forgetfulness of death. She had caught a severe chill, which in her weak state of health had proved very threatening. But her husband was tireless in his attention to her, and life was his reward. She watched him out of her sharp torture, tempted many times to confess, and so end all, but she shrank from the punishment of his contemptuous disgust. Her hours were passed in quivering fits of tears.

The gift of renewed life she accepted in bitter protest ; and in crying agony at visible progress of recovery she beat her hands, till the petulant childishness of such behaviour made her ashamed. She caught a glimpse of the promises of recovery, and found some sustainment there—and at any time she could take her own life ; such a refuge was always open. In the wish not to hinder her husband in a contemplated visit to Rockhampton to attend the meetings of the Medical Congress, she became possessed of the desire for immediate release from her bed. With such small purpose to animate her, she made rapid progress.

But with the return of physical strength, she had to face the knowledge that she would never take her own life. And it was less from a want of courage than from the feeling that she did not deserve an outcast's death. She was forced to contemplate a future, but the threats it contained oppressed her to madness. Her outlook was on the cruellest of facts ; there was nothing at hand to soften their harshness. The past held her shame, the future held revelation of it. And for the present she was a guilty thing, masking in the garb of purity.

In a fear of the pain she was to suffer, to be purposely given herself and unintentionally inflicted by others, she was conscious of some hardening in her nature to meet it. The shock of the sense that she was facing life at the lowest depth, once past, she began to see some promise of support in the fact. But a silent contemplation of it struck her to a hopeless mood, in which the horror of finding herself so changed was overmastering. She of all women to be a dishonoured wife ! It was hateful, torturing, incredible. But surely there must be some means of atonement, some way of escaping from the shame of it. She had not sinned consciously—it was not her real self who had sunk so low. She dwelt in moods of shivering despair.

The definite wish and effort to escape from her own sense of shame were her first real step towards recovery. She felt in the background of her mind, that with a husband's love she could never have deserted for one moment the path of wifely worship. And she wondered that she did not sink to hate of him now. But in the feeling of separation from

him and their child, she found her comfort. She attempted to persuade herself that her sin was a degradation of only her own womanhood.

But her progress was far from constant. Time and again she sank to depths of agony ; her spirits rose and fell like a tide. Her shame was an oppressive burden, and sank her to uncaring torpor. She had to contemplate the fact that she had fallen from the ranks of pure womanhood. She was a creature to be shunned. How could she ever rise above the consciousness of that ! Yet she was intrinsically the same being she had ever been, only she had been caught in a moment of irresponsible passion, and betrayed.

In her frequent pleading for herself her mind rested with comfort on this conviction that her guilt was forgiveable, since it was not her real self who had sinned. Her failure to regard herself as an outcast from the sphere of womanly purity, encouraged the belief that she would yet rise to a lessening remembrance of it all. And in the far future it would dwell with her only intermittently and devoid of pain.

She made a natural attempt to blame Haddie with the shame of it all, but relinquished that effort in the failure to wholly separate her part from his. She was unable to regard him as more infamous than herself. How could she believe iniquitous things of him, and also believe that he loved her ? The blame was not hers, nor his. Was it just that there should be such things as guilt and shame in a confused contradictory world, where sensual impulses held sway ?

She was now frankly glad of her estrangement

from Minnie. The girl's presence under old conditions would add deeply to her anguish. Yet she could not feel wholly satisfied at being deserted, and the recognition that the one immovable reason which demanded they should ever be divided lay in herself, chilled her blood. She had a confused sense of how futile had been her voluntary degradation in defending herself to Minnie, against accusations that were so soon to be worse than justified. In the consciousness of innocence she had forgiven her then, but she could not do so now. The readiness with which Minnie had believed ill of her seemed to her supersensitive mind to hint at even more sinister phases of herself than any she could look back upon.

But nursing the conviction that her sin was chiefly against her own womanhood, she gradually reached to some peace of mind. She was enabled to contemplate an ultimate forgetfulness: and the cultivation of a very liberal philosophy of life was of help to her. Life was a succession of accidents, of wrong-doing, and of their lapse into oblivion. Surely she would in time wholly forget. Her heart beat hopefully at the thought of that being possible. But even if it were denied her, she would daily approach a less acute remembrance of it, and at last would come the first day on which she had not thought of it at all. Onward from that, life would present itself on endurable terms, perhaps even hint at happiness, other than the happiness that a sense of gratitude to her Creator would engender. And so much was really possible,—to-morrow would be a step towards it.

But smitten with the contrast of fact and

promise, of things done with things to be accomplished, she constantly sank back to despair. Facing the outward facts of life, she felt how heavy and decided was to be her punishment. Everything seemed ready to conspire against her efforts towards regeneration, and to force her back to shame. Death was the only real relief. Yet she wanted to blot out only one day of her life. One day! And that was impossible! The fixity of fact, together with the triteness of all sentiment relative to that, struck her to an obstinate determination to conquer despair.

She did not feel that her husband's kind consideration placed her in any frettingly false position. She accepted his tenderness as a natural issue due to her. In transient moments she could even think that he knew all, and that he blamed himself. The shame was hers, and he pitied her! But when she fell away from such attempt at delusion, her distress was but the keener. Why was the world so harsh to its women! And was her husband accordant with the narrow view of the world! The burden of shame was hers; was she not to be pitied!

She drew closer to Ethel than she had ever been, though contact with the child's purity of mind was a threat against her peace. But she clung to her as the nearest and dearest thing in her life. Ethel would forgive her mother even though others could not. The child was lovably responsive to all affectionate advances, and the mother met her voluntary kisses with rapturous delight. The path of atonement was made brighter for her. Often they sat together hand in hand, the mother

dreaming of happiness and finding enchantment in hearing childish questions. She recoiled from the speculation of whether she would have ever strayed in even the smallest degree from the strict path of wifehood, had the child been as close to her in earlier days. She had rather to be thankful now for being enabled to recognise God's bounteousness in the gift of a child. And in a sufficiently irresponsible mood, to think that He had chosen His own means of awakening her to that recognition.

She felt the need of working out atonement, of justifying forgetfulness, but there was nothing within her horizon that beckoned to her. For her mind led her to look for a weighty task, and one to be performed in the sight of the world. For the present she must be content with making her own life better, and could await opportunity for the rest.

The quiet evenness of Mrs Clarke's daily path appealed to her tired spirit, and she sought its imitation. In an effort to identify herself with it, she offered to help in some sewing that the woman had on hand for the benefit of certain indigent *protégées*.

The evening passed pleasantly for her, and she found herself wondering whether Mrs Clarke had ever had any deep sin to repent of. And if so, did she, after years of her restful life, have any remembrance of it now. Her old narrow view of life was offered her again, and she accepted it. Her departure from it had been a record of disgrace, and she could feel that the one was partly responsible for the other. She moved in an atmosphere of religious humility, and her mind was

quietened of all doubts of a future forgetfulness. She counted her progress by the moments that anguish had been absent, and found that one day had marked an advance. But at any moment of complete forgetfulness, when she seemed to be touched by the brightness of life, her shame swept through her with chilling intensity, as if in denial of her having earned such moments.

She found on presenting herself the next afternoon, that Haddie had not gone out. She felt alarmed in his presence, yet the intention of putting herself in close intimacy with Mrs Clarke had not been arrived at without some consideration of the possibility of the accident of an early meeting with him. And in an indefinite way she even wished to meet him. Her mind ran on remembrance of his offer to leave Gympie for her sake, at a time when her need had been less. In pity for her, he would surely leave now. Yet she had no intention of permitting him any speech. She had no definite plan of how he was to be made aware of her hope. It must be accomplished without any help from her. The utmost she could promise was that she would not hide herself from him, but rather exhibit the depth of her repentance.

Yet if he did not leave the town, she was ready to accept his near presence as a fact of her life. She shivered, but did not recoil. She would treat him as an ordinary acquaintance, and gradually school herself to forget the part he had played in her past. And there was some satisfaction to her in that thought, as against the feeling that if he did leave, she would then most probably have permanent remembrance of the fact that he loved

her, and of how far he had sacrificed himself to help her to peace. The basis of all her thoughts concerning him was the confident belief that he was as repentant and ashamed as herself. It was that feeling alone that enabled her to face him.

Nevertheless, she was aware of considerable trepidation in this first meeting. She centred her attention on her work, yet could not be less than certain that he was closely watching her. She felt wearied and soul-sick in the consciousness that to-day was but the earliest chapter of her atonement. She grew afraid of the threatening future, and felt ready to sacrifice everything she had so far accomplished, to a temporary relief in tears.

She realised how great a torture was his presence in the mad insistent desire to escape. And yet she had promised herself in calm thought that such a feeling would not find shelter. She had nerved herself to the belief that she would be able to face him. Her head swam dizzily. The impulse to throw herself at his feet, to demand 'death at the hands she had met dishonour, seemed a symptom of threatening hysteria.

She endeavoured to shut out the sudden consciousness that she was in the grasp of serious doubts of him. The feeling that he must regard her as a degraded thing was analogous to the thought that his repentance was far less sincere than hers. Surely such fancy was but the outcome of her nervousness. She must convince herself of that. But she was greatly relieved when she saw him leave his chair as if in the intention of going out.

"Don't let us disturb you, Haddie," said Mrs Clarke.

"I must go down town," he answered. He looked at the lowered face of Mrs Hunter, and pity swept through him on a wave of his blood. Impulsively he wished for her sake that the past could be undone. She looked to his inquiring gaze the picture of wearied despair, and he saw in the traces of her recent illness how torturingly her shame must have dwelt in her mind. But in this vivid sense of how much she had suffered, and was still to suffer, his love only flamed the fiercer. An increase of passion was what he offered in compensation both to himself and her.

The prospect of gaining her fired his blood. It had never seemed so possible as at this dark period of her repentance. In earlier days his love for her had lived without hope of any attainment. It had been a passion which partly amused him in its waywardness, even while he protested against its torture. The strangeness of being captivated by one who was hopelessly out of reach had been in itself a sustainment, and he had never been able to hope for encouragement from her. And even in looking back now, he was honest enough to recognise how far accident had befriended him.

It had seemed to him that the end of his efforts could but result in her womanly disgust and hate. But facing here the depth of her despair, he had a glimpse of where it could be led. What had she to live for here? Nothing but years of barren repentance. Surely her dread of it all would carry her to choice of the happiness he offered. They could go away anywhere she wished. He was prepared to sacrifice everything for possession of her. His love was a passion outside himself and

the conditions surrounding them both. Its mystery and intensity were its own justification and his.

He came back to the sitting-room after he had taken his hat from the hall. "Is there anything I can do for you in town?" he asked of Mrs Clarke.

"No, Haddie, I want nothing, as far as I remember. Perhaps Mrs Hunter won't object to making use of you, if she has anything she wants done."

"There is nothing," she said in a subdued voice.

"Don't be afraid of employing him," said Mrs Clarke, rallying her. "I find him very trustworthy. He has to do lots of things for me now that Fred has gone. He leaves orders at the shops, changes my School of Arts books, and does almost anything else that turns up. I don't know what I should do without him."

"Well, that you may possibly have to do before long," he said. "I am thinking of going away."

"Going away, Haddie!" she echoed. "Where to?"

"I don't know exactly, but say to England."

"Do you really think of taking a trip there?" she asked. "Won't you take me with you?"

"But I don't think of coming back. You wouldn't care to come in that case."

"No, indeed, I wouldn't. I couldn't leave Gympie for ever. But what has put the idea into your head, Haddie?"

"It is only that I am heartily tired of this place."

"Oh, nonsense!" she said. "You are not serious about not coming back."

"I assure you I am," he answered with quiet emphasis as he left the room.

Mrs Hunter's thoughts were confused. She was intensely relieved at finding that he had determined on leaving Gympie, yet she disliked the fact of the matter having been discussed in her presence. Of course he had referred to it only for her own information, but would it not have been more generous to have refrained. And she could not wholly escape the doubt that his intention was not so sincere as his words had seemed to indicate. What if the project was so distasteful to him that, anticipating Mrs Clarke's objections, he had contrived that she should hear them so that they might help to justify in her eyes a renunciation of purpose.

She was surprised and partly ashamed of how actively suspicious her mind had become. In an endeavour to recover to her old innocence she rose above her mistrust, yet she still felt that it was not without some vague justification.

"I wonder what he wants to leave Gympie for?" said Mrs Clarke. "I can't really believe that he means it." She endeavoured to encourage her own doubts. "And this is the first I have heard of it. I believe it is only a whim, and will soon pass."

"Perhaps so," murmured Mrs Hunter. But she immediately felt that she had not the right to judge him harshly.

"He needs a change, that is all. A holiday will set him up. I have felt more than once that something has been troubling him lately. Perhaps he has lost money."

"Would that make him want to leave?"

"Oh no, not of itself, though I suppose no one likes to lose it—I know I wouldn't. But I would give anything to know the reason. I must try to find out."

"We women hate to have secrets kept from us," said Mrs Hunter, feeling secure in the knowledge of the predestined failure of the other's efforts.

"Of course we do. But, mind you, I don't really think he will go after all; I can't, till I understand the reason. And he himself, though he did speak so decidedly—there is something at the back of it. But you'll see he will come round. Why, it would be the greatest foolishness to leave here when he is doing so well."

"It does seem as if he ought not to go," said Mrs Hunter, sick with despair.

"I shall rally him out of it; don't you fear."

"Do you think you will?"

"You wait and see. He wants a holiday, that is all. And I'll make him take one."

"Yes, that would be best," she said. She lifted her hand to her heart, half in the mad hope that she might still its beatings for ever.

She seriously pondered if she could not withdraw herself from the world, and live within the walls of her own home. In such a limited life she might never reach forgetfulness, but she might come to feel that she had sufficiently atoned.

"I know I could never leave here," said Mrs Clarke, emphatically. "I don't know what I should do in a strange place. I love dear old Gympie; I have so many friends here. I should die if I had to go where I knew no one. I suppose you

are beginning to feel that way, even though you have been here only a comparatively short time?"

"Me? Oh no, I would like to leave it. I wonder if we could? I never thought of that." Her eyes brightened as if at a vision of all the promises at which the inspiration seemed to hint. She was amazed that such a simple possibility had not presented itself to her before. The conservativeness of the womanly mind had shut it out. In the habit of having things done for her, she had not considered if there was anything she could do for herself.

She robed herself in the assurances it contained. Amid new surroundings she would feel in reality that she was beginning life again. She would be removed from visual remembrance of her sin, and would be beholden to no one's generosity for so much. It was a happiness in itself to feel that she was relieved from thoughts of her sin being far reaching in its consequences to others. And the part to be passionately thankful for, was that it could be accomplished with a minimum of difficulty. Her husband cared so little for the place, that it would need scarcely more than a suggestion from her to induce him to decide on leaving it.

"And what can you want to leave for?" asked Mrs Clarke. "I always thought you liked it?"

"Well, I did at first, when I was new to it. But now, after four years, I am beginning to pine for the advantages of a city. One can so easily hide oneself there."

"But is that an advantage?"

"I think it one. I suppose it is because I am not very sociable; that I feel so tired of meeting

only people one knows. I want to see new faces every day, and to be made to feel what a small part I occupy in the world."

"Well, I am sure I can't understand that feeling," said Mrs Clarke with a laugh that disposed of its claim to serious consideration.

"But you are not of an unsociable nature; that is the difference."

"Well, I don't regard you as unsociable, though I think you very reserved, and that you don't see enough of people. You are feeling low-spirited; that is what is the matter. I must get you to go about with me."

"I am afraid it is too late to begin reforming me. And, besides, Mr Hunter doesn't care very much for Gympie. Of course he has his practice, but he could look round for an exchange."

"But you are not really thinking of going?"

"I would like to leave," she said cautiously.

"I hope you don't. It is selfish of me, but I don't mind being selfish in a good cause. Why don't you go about more? I am sure it would do you good. I have heard lots of people speak of the way you shut yourself up. If you went about, you would not be so taken up with Minnie Turner."

Mrs Hunter was not blind to the tentative motive underlying that utterance. For of course Mrs Clarke knew that Minnie had not been to see her for some time, and though she could not name the reason, she doubtless believed there had been a quarrel. She did not answer, and Mrs Clarke, flushing under defeat, and wishing to retreat, asked: "When is she going to Sydney?"

o not know. I have not seen her for some , haven't you ! I hope you haven't quarrelled." , it is not that. But for one reason and r, she has not been to see me. I miss her uch."

Suppose you do. But of course she will call she goes away ?"

ould not say," answered Mrs Hunter, looking

, I don't either," she hastened to say, being hat disturbed by the woman's excessive . "But I should think it probable."

s, of course. I feel sure that she will. Is ney she is going to? She told me that she ever been there, but that a married sister there. I suppose she is going only for a

r a visit to her sister, I understand."

Hickson, the minister's wife, called and sat to sociable converse. She was a thin, little woman of about forty, and the of an excessive family. Her voice was nd subdued, her opinion speculative on most s. Her judgments were narrow, but she did ciously uphold them. Other people might different views, and she would not feel it her o convert them. The demands of her occupied her time, and she had little leisure e duties of a minister's wife. She gave the sion of not having been exactly fitted for rrow life, and of having schooled herself to its.

congratulated Mrs Hunter on her recovery

to health, and blamed her for sedentary habits. Her conversation with Mrs Clarke became confined to particular matters of church interest, in which Mrs Hunter was not very much at home. Mrs Clarke also detailed with humble pride what she had been able to do in the way of helping indigent members of the congregation. She described her visits, and passed judgment on the behaviour and hopes of those she had spoken with. Mrs Hickson listened with approval, bestowing at intervals a compliment to her untiring energy, and expressing the wish that she herself had more leisure. From condemnation of their inferiors they rose to the higher matter of miscellaneous news of their equals. Mrs Hunter took little part in it, yet listened with inward shivering. She felt that their views were hideously narrow and often openly unjust, yet she was sitting there, feeling like an ashamed creature in their presence. What would they say of her if they knew what was pressing so heavily on her heart. But why had she been chosen as a brand of shame for women such as these to pass judgment on. Did their injustice and appalling bigotry carry "no penalties. At least they had no knowledge of their crime. Was every sin forgiveable but her own?

The extraordinary littleness of Mrs Clarke's view of life irritated her, and she encountered some hate of the woman when she recalled that she herself had hoped to find some solace in its imitation. She would escape from Gympie, from Mrs Clarke and her false humility. She would not come near the woman again.

She rose to go, and Mrs Hickson also decided

on leaving. They met Haddie as they came out on the verandah. He banteringly remarked on their fleeing at his arrival, of their being afraid of him. Mrs Hunter confined her attention to some pot-plants on the steps and left Mrs Hickson to reply. He seemed nervously unsettled in his manner, and stood there talking, but Mrs Hunter walked leisurely down the path.

"And how will you get on without your *protégée*?" asked Mrs Hickson, overtaking her in company with Mrs Clarke.

She looked blankly at the woman a moment as if in the feeling that a sense of the words had not reached her. "Oh, you mean Minnie!" she said with a smile.

"I suppose you will feel lost without her."

"Did she go to-day, then?" she asked, wishing to avoid the question.

"I don't know for certain; but I understood she was to go by the mail train to-day."

Reflecting on the fact that Mrs Clarke knew Minnie did not visit her, she saw the necessity of confessing so much to Mrs Hickson. She felt sick with despair, yet dared not let Mrs Clarke see her take refuge in falsity. "I did not know she was going," she said repressively.

Mrs Hickson partly misunderstood her, and vaguely apologised for the definiteness of her statement. "Well, she was over seeing us on Tuesday, and she told us she was going to-day. At any rate, she said good-bye."

"I mean that she didn't come to say good-bye to me," said Mrs Hunter.

"No! How was that?" Her surprise had hurried her into an ill-considered question.

"Minnie is not so fond of me as she used to be," she answered with a saddened smile.

"Oh, well——" Mrs Hickson's recovery to good manners halted her at that point.

"There is nothing very dreadful in that," said Mrs Clarke. "Why, she isn't so fond of me as she used to be."

"I understand that her father doesn't approve of her visiting many people, of her seeing too much of those who can be considered any way above her socially," said Mrs Hunter in explanation.

"I am afraid that will not suit Minnie," said Mrs Hickson.

"She is very fond of her father," Mrs Hunter ventured to insist.

"Yes, of course. But she is very fond of going out as well. When she was over on Tuesday I could see how anxious she was for me to tell her to call on my sister in Sydney—Mrs Bryant. But I was blind to all hints."

"I should think so indeed," said Mrs Clarke. "Mrs Bryant wouldn't care to be troubled by Minnie. Her circle is somewhat above what Minnie is accustomed to."

"Minnie will do very well on her own account," said Mrs Hickson. "She has all the requisite assurance. But she mustn't expect people to help her."

Mrs Hunter delivered her protest in a pretence of good humour. "I am sorry I can't think so ill of her as you people who have known her so long."

"You can know Minnie too long and too well; that is my experience," said Mrs Clarke.

"Yet I like the girl in many ways," murmured Mrs Hickson meditatively.

"Oh, we all do," said Mrs Hunter. The exuberance of her acquiescence was intended to put the woman out of countenance.

"But she has grave faults," said Mrs Hickson in firm conclusion.

"So have we all," said Mrs Hunter with a smile.

They parted at the gate, and Mrs Hunter turned homeward, feeling somewhat consoled by her reflections. Having held her own in opposition to narrow, prejudiced opinions, she could feel that her place in the world was not wholly lost. She had practical proof of her superiority to some whom the world recognised. Nor was the discovery of Minnie's defeated attempt at social advancement so distasteful to her as under freer conditions it might have been. She knew that the girl's outlook in some directions was petty, but such accusation was in her mind a general one, relating chiefly to past matters. But to find that she still possessed the old craving for social elevation was pleasing to her; the universal imperfection of human nature was so distinctly revealed.

The information that Minnie had left Gympie added to the promises of the immediate future. It seemed to mark the first step in the breaking up of her old life. She felt even vaguely alarmed at a contemplation of how near escape lay to her. There were absolutely no difficulties in the way. Her husband would readily consent; and she would reward him for such kindness.

Outward circumstances seemed to have changed in intention to her; Fate itself was wearing the

garb of sympathy. She had even been able to leave the house without speaking to Haddie. Mrs Hickson's ~~presence~~ 111

--- ~~grateful~~ to the kind chance that had sent the woman there. It was quite possible that she need never see him again. He could leave Gympie or stay: it was a matter of indifference to her. He would not be able to feel that he was making a sacrifice for her.

Her husband was to start for the Medical Congress to-morrow, and would meet old friends there. She had but to tell him now that she would like to leave the place, and he would be able to arrange the matter while he was absent. There could not possibly have been a more favourable time for her to mention the subject to him.

Her heart beat in fond happiness in seeing Ethel running to meet her. The act spoke to her of the charm and ties of home, and carried her to some fervour of feeling. After all, what a mistake she had made in looking for happiness outside of that, even in having fancied that Minnie's friendship was the thing necessary for the completion of her life. What would her life be now without Ethel, without the confident feeling that there was one who really loved her.

She was smitten by some dim dread when she saw the child stumble and fall. She hurried forward, though half conscious of the extravagance of her fears. But she cried out in heart-stung torture when Ethel, rising to her feet, showed a face streaming with blood.

"O muma, look what I have done!" she cried as she ran forward with her pinafore held to her cheek.

The mother stooped and caught her in her arms. "My poor child!" she murmured tenderly. "Let me see it."

"I fell on some glass, muma. I didn't know it was there." She seemed to gather strength to bear the pain of it, and removing the pinafore, she showed a jagged wound.

"Oh, it is horrible. My poor dear Ethel! I wish I could bear it for you."

The child, nauseated at the sight of blood, gave a crying gasp, and lay unconscious in the mother's arms. The horror of flowing blood struck at the woman's heart, and her hysterical feelings found issue in tears. She kissed the upturned face, and gathering the child in her arms, carried her inside the house.

She laid her on her bed and began to bathe the face. Ethel shivered at the touch of cold water, and opened her eyes. "Muma," she cried in subdued distress.

"My darling, your muma is here. Does it pain you still?"

"Yes, muma."

"Lie quiet then with this handkerchief to it. Dada will take the pain away when he comes; won't he, dear?" She leaned across the bed, and the child drew close to her. "Muma won't leave you, dear. Is it still paining?"

She sighed assent, and nestled closer. The mother remained silent, hoping the child would fall asleep. She thought she had done so, but was startled out of her reveries by a small question.

"Where is dada?"

"He isn't home yet, Ethel; but he won't be long."

"Will he be angry?"

The tears started to her eyes at a question so childishly pathetic.

"Angry with you, darling! Oh, Ethel, how can you think so. He will be sorry, so sorry for his dear little girl, like muma is." She saw in the child's question only the anxious wish to avoid even involuntarily displeasing her father, but she might have gone deeper, and discovered that her young mind, schooled beyond its limits, had lost its balance. Her father had trained her in his own way, and had taught her obedience, in the form of a blind surrender to his commands.

"He told me not to run," she persisted.

"But it was running to meet muma." She felt that the child's piteous blame of herself was likely to command her tears.

"Yes, muma, I was running to meet you. And I didn't know it was there." Such rescue from the fear of being in fault seemed to unnerve her. She sobbed afresh, and the mother bent over her with whisperings of tenderness.

Ethel's grandmother came in, and was lovingly sympathetic. She kissed the child's cheek, and was moved to softest pity by particulars of the disaster. The mother watched her fond attention to Ethel's comfort, and was aware of some jealousy, in spite of the consciousness of how ignoble was the feeling. But she saw what a gulf divided the woman and herself when their mutual love of the child did not tend to bring them closer. She felt that their dislike was something beyond their own influence.

Mr Hunter did not appear in time for dinner, and Ethel, after having her wound attended to, was

put to bed. The mother read to her till she fell asleep, and afterwards lay down on her own bed, being unwilling to leave her alone. It was not that she had any fear centred in the child, but chiefly that she wished for her own sake to be near her.

She reflected on the intended departure of her husband in the morning, and wondered that he was willing to leave his mother and herself alone. Was it that he regarded their disputes as of no real significance, or that he had his mother's promise of forbearance! He would be absent rather less than a fortnight, but every day would, she felt, be a burden. His mother's visit was drawing to a close; she would be going shortly after his return. At least if she did not go home, she would be going to friends in Brisbane. The essential point was that she herself was to be relieved.

She would then begin a new life. And once she was out of Gympie she would be happy. She would make herself worthy of her child and necessary to her husband. She recognised that this accident to Ethel was not wholly ill, as far as she was affected, though she felt a sting in looking at the child's pain as intended as any help to her. But she would now feel the weight of her shame in a somewhat less degree than she had before. She felt that she had given proof of her use in the world. She was still Ethel's mother, and fitted to bestow a mother's tenderness.

She heard the buggy being taken into the yard, and presently her husband came up the steps, but as his mother was on the verandah she did not rise; he would be informed by her of the accident. She

heard their voices and presently his step in the passage.

"Are you there, Kate?" he questioned from the doorway. "How is she?"

"She is asleep, Edgar; she was tired out."

They stood beside the child's bed together. It was not till he touched her hand that she was swept by a shivering remembrance.

"I suppose it will be best not to disturb her," he said. "Poor little girl! Do you know if the cut is very deep?"

"I think it must be; it bled so. She fainted out on the street."

"I would like to see it before I go. But I must leave it till the morning. Did she bleed inside the mouth?"

"No, Edgar; at least I don't think so."

"Very likely not. But it will leave a scar, I suppose."

"Oh, I hope not," she said.

"Poor little woman! I am sorry I wasn't here. I have been detained by an accident—a broken leg. Some youngsters were playing in the street, and a cart went over one of them."

"Poor little fellow! Was he much hurt?"

"It is not a bad break; it will soon mend. He was out of pain when I left, though he still lay moaning. A nice little chap he seems. I was quite sorry for him, but children are so careless."

"Ethel was running to meet me when she fell."

He was dull enough to miss the connection between her words and his own. "So mother was saying," he answered.

"You do not blame her?" she asked softly.

"Whom? Ethel! Surely not. What makes you think so?"

She felt a pure satisfaction in shielding the child. "I do not know."

"I am very sorry for the little darling. But blame her! Not in the least—accidents are common enough. I only wish I had been here to attend to my own child instead of waiting on some one else's."

"Yes, Edgar," she said in tenderness. "You are going to-morrow," she added, as he turned to leave the room.

"I have arranged everything. The early train, of course, as I must catch the boat."

"We shall all feel lonely without you. I wish you were not going."

"Why is that, Kate?" He suddenly realised how much he would treasure a display of wisely attachment.

"I do not know," she answered tremulously. "Something may happen."

"What can happen, dear? You are nervous to-night, Kate. What is the reason?"

"I do not know." To his absolute amazement she threw herself weeping on the bed in a passion of quivering sobs.

Embarrassed by such evidence of her feelings, he stood beside her with his hand caressing her hair. He was ashamed to feel that his own tenderness did not go very deep, but for the moment she was more lovely in his sight than she had ever been.

"My dear, dear Kate," he murmured. "What has upset you?" he questioned, as her sobs lessened.

She turned a piteously tear-stained face to him.
"Kiss me, Edgar," she whispered.

That unexpected appeal shot through his heart.
He rained passionate kisses on her lips.

"I love you!" she whispered. "Oh, Edgar, you
do not know how much."

"I do, my darling. As much as I love you." He was conscious of a faint falsity, and continued in angry protest of that feeling. "I do love you, Kate. But perhaps I have grown unaccustomed to showing it. What an insensible thing we can make of life. And my poor little darling has suffered, and I did not see it. I have been a brute!"

"Oh no, Edgar. Don't say things against yourself, or what will you say of me?"

"You are my darling little wife; that is what I say of you."

"And you really love me, Edgar?"

"I do, my darling; have you doubted that? What a callous brute I have been. But I will reform, and you will be happy once more."

"We must leave Gympie," she murmured.

"Yes, Kate, if you wish it."

"Oh, Edgar, will you?" she entreated.

"Yes, dear one. I am not fond of the place, and if you particularly hate it——"

"I do, I do," she said quivering. "Edgar, you can never know how much. It has all but ruined my life. I cannot live in it any longer. I hate it!"

He understood that the recollection of how loveless had been the last few years of her life was the basis of such violent antipathy, and in blame of

himself he was generous towards her. "We can settle it all when I come back, dear. But perhaps I shall be able to do something towards it up there."

"Oh, if you could! You do not know all it means to me. I would be a different woman—a better woman, away from here."

"You could not be better than you are, Kate."

"I could—I could. You do not know how wicked I am."

"But I know how good you are."

"Do you, Edgar? And you are sure you love me?"

"I am sure that I love my little wife."

"I am so happy now." She shuddered at a memory of what little right she had to happiness.

"And so am I, Kate. Perhaps I never really knew before what a loving little wife I had."

"She will be more loving still, more necessary to you, when she is away from here."

"Poor little Kate! It won't be long then."

"But you have not had your dinner, Edgar, I have been keeping you." She was far less conscious than was he, of the measure of the descent to the practical woman.

"My darling is happier now?" he asked.

"She is quite happy, I think."

"I shall look upon this Congress as a turning-point in my life, since it brings me nearer to you. I am so glad I thought of going, aren't you?" His idle inferences pleased himself; he was sure their utterance would please her.

"It has proved to be for the best, better than I hoped for, or dreamed of," she said. "And I was so afraid of something happening if you went."

"Afraid of the train being wrecked or the steamer being sunk?" he questioned gaily.

"Of both of them," she said in tender exaggeration. "And perhaps of something happening here."

"But you are not now, Kate?"

"No, dear, that is all gone. I have no fear of any kind."

"And of course you mustn't worry about Ethel, she will soon recover. I'll have a look at the wound in the morning."

"Very well, Edgar. I think it was the sight of her in such pain and streaming with blood that upset me to-day. Life seemed to be so cruel, so full of cruelty."

CHAPTER XVI

INTRODUCES A DISCORDANT NOTE

LIFE had revealed an inner meaning to her, and she was happy. She went about gifted with a new strength, before which the small worries of daily existence sank quite away. Her enchantment was supreme, and lifted her out of the sordid atmosphere of the common world. It seemed as if outward facts, while still presenting their old appearance, disclosed also a hidden meaning, harmonious with her own inner life.

Her husband's parting from her had been most tender. She had now a loving memory to dwell upon. A reluctance to leave her had come upon him, revealing devoted aspects of him. She too had been pained at the need of his departure, but she saw the wisdom of subduing her feelings. She could admit the justice of being denied for a little while his loving presence, as an offset against the happiness of having re-awakened his love. But in him there was no wish for self-sacrifice: he was frankly unwilling to go. But she would not consent, fearing that if he stayed he might afterwards regret it, and in such mood find that she was partly blameable. And in his absence his passion would increase.

Her mother love for Ethel seemed in its first strength. She could but regard the child as the means by which her husband had been won back to her, and indeed as the source of all her happiness. She made herself a companion to her, entering into her amusements with simple ardour. They lived side by side: the revelation of mysterious depths of the childish mind enchanted her, though she at times was conscious of a strange sense of fear, in feeling that she was in the presence of one of God's immortal creatures, yet one for whose existence in the world she was responsible. She lovingly recognised the child as part of herself, equal in the sight of God, and both entrusted to the care of one they loved,—the child as father, and she as husband.

She suffered from little or no acute sense of the abased value she offered him in return for his love. His tenderness surrounded her with a new atmosphere, which in its purity denied existence to despair. She had begun life anew, launched on futurities by his love.

Thoughts of Haddie had now almost wholly dropped out of her life. Scarcely oftener than when momentary moods of dismay visited her did he credibly appear in her horizon. She felt no vigorous hate towards him, but only a horror of what his love had been to her. She recalled with a pang of shame that she had once looked upon it as of some value to her, as a factor in her life. She saw too where much conception of it had hurried her. But she must not blame him; she must only forget. She was captivated by the thought that she might never see him again. She

INTRODUCES A DISCORDANT NOTE 191

was clearly conscious of the wish to wholly escape him in the desire to keep her new self,—the one her husband loved,—from the contamination of his presence.

She purposed keeping away from Mrs Clarke, partly in resentment towards the woman, but chiefly in the wish to feel that she needed no other factor than her domestic ties to carry her to forgetfulness. And the advantages of Mrs Clarke's habit of life had ceased to attract. She recognised that the woman's peaceful outlook was less the result of strenuous endeavour in well-doing than the accident of a limited education and experience. She could feel that her piety, though it shaped much of her conduct, did not necessarily decide it. The inconsistencies of a mind unconsciously insincere were revealed to her.

But in coming home from church with Ethel, she was overtaken by the woman, and had to promise her assistance in some work she had on hand. The fact of being so compelled to do the thing she had intended not doing, weakened her faith in herself, and even her hope in departure. It seemed as if circumstances still commanded her, and would not take the path she had prepared for them. It was cruel that she should be driven back to the woman to whose view of life she had grown superior. She would feel freighted and distressed in her company, in being forced into contact with the false ideal that had been hers in the lowest depths of despair.

On presenting herself, she found that Mrs Clarke was on the point of leaving the house. The situation was explained at some length.

"I am just taking some mutton broth to old Mrs Barnett over the road. She is near her end, poor old thing. Her grand-daughter is almost driven out of her mind. She was here a few minutes ago, and asked me to go over."

"I didn't know the poor woman was so bad. Can I do anything?"

"No, there is nothing for any one to do. I do not think she will last much longer. She is a querulous old body too. You should hear the strange things she says. They almost make you want to laugh, except you know—Ah well, death is a strange thing. I do feel sorry for that poor girl; she will be left alone in the world. She has no other relative alive. And though her grandmother couldn't have been much company for her the last few years, still she was the same flesh and blood."

"The poor girl! How sad it must be to be left quite alone."

"Of course it will be a blow; but she will recover. She is strong and healthy. Perhaps it is for the best too. Of course it is in the end, but it seems hard. His ways are inscrutable to us."

"I hadn't noticed the poor old body about lately, but I didn't know she was so ill."

"They are rather poor. They ought to have had a nurse in, but I suppose they couldn't afford it. The poor girl is quite worn out."

"I am sorry I can't be of use. I would only be in the way if I went over, and it seems so comparatively unfeeling to offer help now. But if there is anything I can do, you won't hesitate to"

"No, I shall not. But there is nothing to be done at present. I saw their doctor this morning as he was coming out; he says she may last three days, or she may last a week, but scarcely more. The poor girl seems heart-broken, but you can't get her to leave the house. She has a woman in to help her now, besides the servant."

"Any one else would only be in the way."

"Yes, of course: They are Church of England people." She felt justified in revealing how unsectarian was her sympathy.

"So I have heard."

"I will just run over now, if you don't mind my leaving you. I don't suppose I shall be long."

"Don't hurry on my account. But perhaps I had better not stay, but come to-morrow instead."

"I won't let you escape now that you have come. You can be getting on with something. Say you don't mind and I'll get the material for you."

She sat down, though slightly nervous at the prospect of being left alone in the house. She felt as if she were suddenly called upon to assume Mrs Clarke's personality, and she foresaw her shortcomings. But she managed to subdue such idle feeling with the remembrance that Mrs Clarke did not intend to be long away.

In looking for the cause of her vague dismay she found it partly in the fear of meeting Maud, who would presently be coming home from school. She had recently made it her habit to ignore the child, and had no wish to face her alone in her mother's house, where she would be compelled to take notice of her. Of meeting Haddie there was

little likelihood. It was long before his time for leaving town, and she intended going home before he could appear.

"Here you are," said Mrs Clarke. "Everything is ready for you—the material cut out, and there is the pattern. You'll be quite at home. And I won't be long if I can help it."

"Don't hurry back merely because I am here."

"But it is no good my staying if I can't be of use."

"Maud is not home yet, I suppose?"

"She will be coming presently. But don't let her follow me. Keep her with you, will you?"

She endeavoured to be assiduously industrious over the sewing, but she felt uneasy, and could not limit her mind to its demands. The knowledge that some one close at hand lay dying stirred her thoughts. The mystery of life, when centred in its application to herself, seemed to chill her blood. What was to be her destiny? To die peacefully in her husband's arms, or—perhaps to be sacrificed in some dreadful accident. One minute warm with life, and the next a hideous, misshapen form, offensive to the earth. It was all so strange, so awful in its mystery.

She felt the pain of an imprisoned spirit beating its wings against finite facts. Her heart went out in passionate inarticulate pity for the people in a world whose immensity daunted. In no aspect did it halt at finitude, in no degree was it intelligible. Touch any fact and it led to eternity; to furthest futurity on the one side, on the other, to the beginning of all things. The contemplation of her inescapable union with every act and thought

in universal life appalled her. Her little share in it seemed to have developed to a portentous portion. Why was it that she did not rise up from her chair and run shrieking down the street, driven mad by the weight of the mystery of it all? What separated her from such an act? What was the barrier between her present self and that possible one?

She grew nervous in such flights. The very ticking of the clock above her told that life was ebbing away, and that she was doing nothing in the world, that she would leave behind her no memory of herself—the sum of her efforts for at least a quarter of an hour. She looked at the sewing, and threw it on the table. What did such work count in an eternity?

She got up in the determination of escaping from disquietening thoughts. Out on the veranda a gentle wind fanned her face, and the scent of flowers rose up to her. She stood looking down at the garden, her gaze wandering slowly from one blossom to another, and her mind, contemplating the beauty of Nature, sank to quietude. The world seemed to be now more intelligible, and more within her vision, and she grew quickly ashamed of the idle fancies that had driven her out. She was about to return to her work when she saw Maud at the gate.

"Hullo, are you here?" said the child, who was visibly disconcerted.

"Your mother is over the way at Mrs Barnett's. She won't be long."

"I'll go over, too. I'll just put these books inside first."

"Your mother doesn't want you to go. Mrs Barnett is very ill."

"I won't go inside. I'll just go over and see if muma is there."

"Oh, she is there; I'll answer for that. And she told me you were not to follow her."

"But I'll only go to the gate. I don't want to go in."

In the wish to escape from the discussion, she went back to the sitting-room. She was slightly conscious of hoping that the child would act up to her conception of her by disobeying her mother's injunction. She heard the click of the gate, but resisted the small temptation to look if it were Maud really going out. Taking up her work again, she set herself closely to it.

She was so deeply occupied that she did not hear a step in the hall, but becoming suddenly conscious that some one was near her, she looked up, and saw Haddie. In the feeling that she had been designedly trapped, her first thought was of escape. But he stood between her and the doorway. Her power of defiance fled, and she sank to a pained fear of him.

"I didn't expect to find you here, Mrs Hunter," he said.

"Mrs Clarke has just gone over to Mrs Barnett's. She promised not to be long." She felt that the effort of speaking had robbed her of all remaining strength.

He stood as if undecided, and labouring under some excitement. He feared to face her yet dared not succumb to fear. He halted a moment to gain courage, and his confidence in himself carried

him forward. "I didn't hope to find you is what I think I meant," he said.

A shiver ran through her, and she tried to withstand the current of it, but it swept over her again and again. She threw her outstretched arms on the table, and buried her face from him. His heart was wrung by such revelation of feminine depths. He came towards her, but she looked up frightenedly.

"Oh don't, don't!" she pleaded. "Please don't come near me!"

"I suppose you hate me," he said in a voice that quivered.

His emotion seemed to shatter her control, and pained sobs broke from her in piteous regularity.

"Can't you say anything to me?" he asked.

"I must go home," she sobbed.

"Say that you hate me."

"I hate myself."

The words set his blood aflame. "My darling you must not! I will not let you. There is no reason why you should. Why should we both be unhappy? I love you, and shall never cease to love you!"

"Don't, don't! I did not come here for this!" she cried.

"You do not doubt me; you could not even if you would. But will you come with me? will you trust yourself to me? You will never know happiness here—my heart aches in sympathy for the suffering you have endured. Come with me and you shall be happy. We shall go anywhere you like; no one will find us."

She stood up, the imposing figure of a wronged

woman at bay. "I hate you now!" she said in quivering passion.

"You do not. It is only because of your womanly dread of such a step. For what is there to keep you here? You can never be happy—the gain will be yours as well as mine. I swear to devote my life to you. Say you will come! You will be happier—" He stopped abruptly as in the manner of one detected. She looked for the reason, and saw Mrs Clarke and Maud standing in the doorway, the woman's face picturing the intensest surprise. She staggered back with a cry of despair, and he ran to save her, but she swept past him with a scream, and went running out of the house.

She was conscious of nothing but that her sin had been discovered. She fled down the path, as if in the attempt to escape the horror of it. She was now the mad figure of herself that she had pictured. Time alone had separated her from it.

She went to her own room, and, closing the door softly, she locked it and threw herself on the bed. Her first impulse was to smother herself in the pillows, but her quivering sobs fought for air, and she lay watching her forced breathing. But in forcing her mind back to a review of the hateful episode, she did not find much to fear. She was deeply glad that her husband was away. This new incident did not affect the purity of their reconciliation, did not in any way thrust her from him. Their re-union was a thing apart—and above. And as her chief hope was in escape from Gympie, she could not feel that she was shut out from happiness by Mrs Clarke's discovery. She tried to estimate what was the least the woman

would be able to understand from the little she had seen and heard. She comforted herself with the conviction that the least was all she had to fear. It would probably mean only that Mrs Clarke's house would be closed to her, and that she must keep wholly to herself. There could scarcely be any deeper development of the incident.

But her blood revolted at a memory of what Haddie had offered her. In facing the monstrous proposal she was besieged with the conviction that his conduct had from the first been directed by infamous hope. The blackness of the self he had revealed threw a shadow over the whole past. She shuddered at the feeling of how often she must have faced in him unfathomable depths of depravity. And the knowledge that her degradation was but the issue of his determined purpose summoned feelings that in their intensity threatened a return to her old despair.

But she gradually became calmer, and surrendered herself to a vision of future happiness. She fell asleep and dreamed of her new home. Her own Gympie life lay far behind, and indistinct. She awoke with a glad feeling of comfort, and plunged into waking dreams.

She heard a knock at the front door, but was in no way inspired to uneasiness. Her sense of security was shattered by the sound of Maud's voice in the hall. She listened for the words, but they were indistinct. The silence that followed her mother-in-law's answer seemed an echoing eternity.

Her faculties being forced to outward attention, tears were denied her. Hope had vanished, leavin

her encircled by despair. She felt submerged by the waves of her shame, and succumbed without a struggle. Her one wish was for annihilation ; the visible future only intensified her present need of death. Fear had pierced her soul, and still hung over her. Yet she was conscious of a dim feeling of satisfaction in the recognition that further hypocrisy was denied her. She was to be forced to accept the honest consequences of her sin. She could but feel that death was a wider refuge than life. It engulfed the past as the other could not.

“Is it you, Kate?” said Mrs Hunter from the doorway. “I was not sure that you were in.”

“I have been asleep. What do you want?” she asked faintly.

“I am going to run up to Mrs Clarke’s for a few moments. She has sent for me.”

“Don’t go ! oh, don’t go !” she cried.

“What is the matter, Kate ?” the woman enquired solicitously, in crossing to the bedside.

“Nothing.” She made a desperate effort to stifle her sobs, but they conquered her.

“My dear, dear Kate, what is it ?”

“Don’t touch me ! Please don’t ! If you only knew—oh, I wish I were dead !”

“Have I done anything ?”

“You ! No ; what have you done ?” She saw the irony of fate that offered her the woman’s sympathy when it was too late, when a hideous, unforgivable thing lay between them.

“Is it something about Mrs Clarke ? Tell me, Kate ; perhaps I can help you. Indeed, I feel sure I can.”

“Is Maud there ?”

"She is waiting."

"Well, send her home. Please do. I hate the child being in the house. I hate to think she is near me. Send her home. I am not well."

"I am sure you are not," said Mrs Hunter kindly, as she went to speak to Maud.

"What did she say?" asked Kate when she came back.

"Nothing, dear."

"Did she say what her mother wanted to see you for?"

"No; she just said that her mother had sent her, and she was to say the matter was very urgent."

"Did you tell her you wouldn't go?"

"I said that you were not well, and that I couldn't go just at present."

"Oh, why did you say that? Why didn't you say that you wouldn't go at all?"

"Well, I shan't go, Kate, if you think it would be best not to. I certainly don't want to go." She stood by the bedside, and caressed the face of the pitied woman. Kate's first impulse was to avoid the mistaken tenderness, but the clinging woman in her conquered. She submitted to the solace of it, and clasping the hand between her own, looked up with entreating eyes to an unconscious purity that was once her own. She held the hand to her lips, and her tears fell quickly upon it.

"My dear, dear Kate, what is it?" said Mrs Hunter. It came to her in a sense of shame that, in watching the prostrate form, it looked as if she were judging one inferior, and she slipped

beside her on the bed. "My poor, dear girl!" she murmured.

Kate surrendered herself wholly. In a feeling of how accidental was her escape from the terrors that had threatened, she sank to quivering tears.

"Kate, dear, don't take on so!"

"Hold me closer!" she whispered. "I feel so lonely."

With silence to soothe her she fell asleep, leaving Mrs Hunter to some speculation as to the cause of her excitable mood. Her conclusion was not disturbing. She considered that the departure of Edgar had worked upon her feelings, and the fact of being shut up in the house together with his mother, with whom she had always been at some enmity, had intensified a feeling of desertion. She was in a nervous, excitable state, as the celerity with which she had fallen asleep might show. And even a little quarrel with Mrs Clarke, of only the smallest consequence in itself, had distressed her. With the possible substance of that quarrel she did not concern herself. The one peculiarity in the matter was, that she had been sent for. Evidently Mrs Clarke must think herself very justified. But, then, who could expect to always discover reason in her behaviour, or define the windings of the religious straight course? For herself she had no interest in the woman, and some dislike towards her.

But she was not sorry to draw nearer to Kate on an intelligible footing. Kate had never before pleaded to her in weakness, or revealed the sweet dependency of womanhood—a quality of which she herself was almost free, yet viewed with a

masculine sympathy. She pitied Kate, but chiefly for the waywardness that had brought her unhappiness. Reproach of herself she did not reach to.

She freed herself from her embrace, and got up from the bed. A disturbed sigh from the reclining figure was a new sweetness to her, whispering as it did of the poor girl's regretful, if unconscious, loss of her. She stood looking down seeing a daughter before her, and on a wave of her blood feeling more intensely related to her than she had ever been to any one. She went out of the room, but in the passage stopped at a pained remembrance that she had not kissed the woman. Such unfeeling forgetfulness she accepted as proof of a deficient nature. She did not go back, but rather decided on bearing the punishment of a self-denied reward.

The sun had gone down behind the hills, and the evening was gathering to dusk. The quiet evenness of her surroundings set her thoughts on a gentle plane, and she found herself going back to far-away memories.

When Ethel came in, she explained to the child that her mother was not well, that they had better have dinner without waking her. She could herself, however, feel some strangeness in sitting down with her grandchild alone, and came to fancy that Ethel felt an unconscious loneliness in being deprived of father and mother. So that an apparent singularity in the manner of the servant-girl, as she waited at table, seemed but natural to the case, and was set down as a mistaken fancy of her own. But when she went to her own room, after the meal

was ended, she was nervously startled by hearing some one behind her. She turned quickly, and saw the girl holding out a letter towards her.

"What is it, Mary?" she said sharply, in recovering from her nervousness.

"I was told to give it to you, ma'm, when no one was by. It is from Mrs Clarke. Their girl brought it."

"Oh well—— That will do. I know what it is; it is of no consequence. The girl is not waiting?"

"No, ma'm; she went back at once."

"Well, thank you, Mary." She opened the envelope slowly, her feelings inimical to her guess at the contents.

"What can the woman want?" she murmured to herself. "I suppose I had better go, though her vehemence is absurd. Poor, hysterical creature!" She was the easier convinced of the expediency when she reflected on the present opportunity. Kate was asleep, and might be expected to continue so for some time, while she herself would not be long away. She did not trouble to guess at what was evidently greatly troubling Mrs Clarke. The very urgency of the woman's request seemed to her to insist on the pettiness of it all.

And whatever the matter might be, she was prepared to take Kate's part and defend her. She would be able to tell her when she awoke, that, after all, she had been to Mrs Clarke's, and to have the sweet satisfaction of comforting her with the assurance that the matter was ended, with nothing left to be worried about.

CHAPTER XVII

REJECTS AN OFFER OF HAPPINESS

MRS HUNTER awoke to a troubled consciousness. Her misery seemed at her waking moment to clothe her like a garment—the touch of it chilling her soul. What was the present worth of life to her? She was contending against unfathomable forces, warding off the fatalities that were threatening; and in her heart she felt the premonition of ultimate failure. She must nerve herself to struggle while feeling that every success was vain.

The darkness of the room made her timorous; familiar objects assumed strange shapes, and moved as if by the hand of portentous Fate. And all in the house was so deathly still. But for the gas in the hall she might have imagined that she was imprisoned in some forgotten dungeon. There was no sound. Had she been deserted? Had Mrs Hunter and Ethel both fled from her as from one accursed? She listened with stilled breath, but as if to mock her the whole world was silent. She was abandoned; her sin had been discovered.

She rested a moment quietly, even contentedly, in that belief, feeling that now full penalty had been visited upon her. She was conscious of an

indefinite pride in having been deemed fit to bear punishment. But the hopelessness of continuing to bear it, of living under it from day to day, struck all feeling from her, and let in despair.

And now that she had reached the lowest depths she was able to act, in contradiction to her beliefs. She opened the door, and the flood of light cheered her a moment. Her mind was at issue between the feelings of home it inspired and her fears. In the parlour she found Ethel at a story-book, but her heart suddenly thundered in its beatings when she saw that Mrs Hunter was not there.

“Are you better, muma?” said Ethel, running to her.

“Where is your grandmother? Is she in her room?”

“She has gone to Mrs Clarke’s, but she won’t be long, muma. She has just gone. She said she would be back——”

“To Mrs Clarke’s!” she said hoarsely.

“Oh, muma dear, what is the matter? Don’t look like that!”

“She has just gone, you said! Did Maud come for her again?” She sat down despairingly in a chair; there seemed to be nothing for her to do but to surrender herself to judgment.

“No, muma; no one came,” said Ethel. “Shall I go for her? Are you ill, muma?”

“You go for her, child! What could you do? You want to leave me as well?”

“Muma, no, I don’t! I won’t leave you; I’ll stay with you. But grandma won’t be long. She said she would be back before I had read one story, and I’ve nearly finished it.”

"She is there now! Oh, the misery of her knowing all! I cannot bear it! Is there no escape! O heavens, was I born for this! What can I do? I cannot stay here; I must know the worst!" She started up from her chair, and the child followed her, with outstretched hands, to clasp her.

"Muma, don't go! Grandma won't be long; she said she wouldn't."

"Don't touch me, Ethel!" she cried. "You don't know what I am."

"O muma dear!"

"I am not your muma! I am—O God pity me!"

She evaded the child, and ran from the house. Fear coursed through her blood, and she felt the weak wish to throw herself on the ground. At the gate she waited a moment to listen if the child were following, and saw her standing in the doorway. She ran up the street with that picture of Ethel haunting her mind.

She was afraid of what lay before and behind. The street itself was full of terrors, but she ran on, hastening to face the thing she most feared. And yet what could she do? She was conscious only of the wish to take Mrs Hunter from the sound of Mrs Clarke's voice. She would herself tell all. That would mean the destruction of her dreams of a happiness drawn from a deserved forgiveness. But nothing could be so hateful as that Mrs Hunter should hear from that woman.

She opened the gate, and the appearance of a figure coming towards her along the path cheered her for a moment. But she sank to nausea when she knew it was Haddie.

"It is you?" he said, in hurried emotion. "I was going down to you."

"Is Mrs Hunter in there?" she asked, oblivious of the purport of his words.

"Come this way with me. I will tell you what has happened."

"No; I am going in there. Do not hinder me."

"You can do no good. Come with me for a moment at least."

"No, no. I am afraid. Let me go past."

"What do you want to do?"

"I do not know. I want to speak to Mrs Hunter."

"They must not find us talking here. I have something to tell you. Won't you come?"

"Where do you want me to go? Tell me all quickly. I do not know what I am doing; I seem to have lost everything. The feeling is torture. What do you want to tell me?"

"Come this way so that they cannot hear our voices." He led her across the grass, down towards the fence that divided them from her own house.

Her emotions, though in a tangle, seemed struggling back to order. Fear and shame strove for mastery in her mind. "I will not go any further," she cried. "I ought not to have come at all. Oh, take me back! Take me into them! But no, I cannot face them! Oh, what must I do?"

"You must come with me," he answered, endeavouring to take her hand. "You must trust yourself to me, and I will answer for the rest."

"Let me go!" she cried. "Oh, why are you so base? Was it for this that you brought me here?"

"My darling, it is your only choice. My love is all that is left you. Come with me anywhere out of this—say you will! For your own sake, as well as mine, you must!"

"What do you mean?" she whispered in terror.

"Mrs Clarke knows everything, and Maud has been telling her all sorts of lies. She thinks you and I have arranged it together about getting away. My talk to her about leaving the place—"

She staggered back as if to escape the contamination of his words. "She doesn't!" she whispered. "She doesn't think that—" She could go no further, but her look was a frantic appeal.

"Oh, but she does! Can't you see that is why Mrs Hunter was sent for? I did my best: I did what I could to stop it, but that fool of a woman has gone mad. She spoke to me—you can't believe how she has taken on. I could do nothing. She won't believe a word from me."

"I do not think I understand you," she murmured.

"She thinks that we are ready to go, that we have only been waiting for the opportunity. Mr Hunter's absence—can't you see how everything fits in with her theory? And, for God's sake, let us profit by it!"

"How cruel it all is!" she said brokenly. "Mrs Clarke—how can she think such a thing? But will Mrs Hunter believe her? Oh, what misery! How can I escape from it all?"

"By coming with me, darling!" he cried. "I love you; all that is best in me speaks of you—lives for you. You can make what you will of your life. We shall go anywhere—everywhere. I

offer you all I have—my whole life. Say you will come ; this life is killing you ! ”

She stood unmoved before him ; her eyes saw nothing, her ears heard nothing. She looked as if expectant of some spiritual event. With her nerves at such tension she heard the roar of the world as it swept by, leaving her stranded, and she fell to the ground.

Her first conscious feeling was one of weakness, coupled with the hope that misery had effectually conquered her. But, to her piteous anguish, her strength came back.

“ Don’t touch me ! ” she said, as he was stooping over her.

“ Are you better now ? ”

“ Why can’t I die at once, instead of suffering like this ? ” she cried.

“ Come with me, darling ! There are years of life before you, and I promise you they shall be happy ones. You do not doubt my love. You are surely not afraid to trust me ? ”

“ Don’t ! don’t ! ” she cried. “ Has a man no shame ? You have lost all respect for me—you never had any.”

“ How cruel you can be ! ”

“ Cruel ? ” she echoed childishly. “ Am I cruel, too ? ”

“ O darling, say you will come ! Do not let your fears conquer you. I love you ! When will you realise all of what that means ? ”

“ Yes ! ” she answered, with her despair rising to a passionate height. “ And see what your love has done for me ! When will you realise what that means to me ? Think of what I am, and think of

REJECTS AN OFFER OF HAPPINESS 211

what I know you are ! Have I not shame enough in that without——” Her voice gave way, and she was threatened by weak tears.

“ But it is only madness to look back,” he insisted. “ You cannot stay here, knowing what you will have to face. Come with me ; I swear you will never have cause to repent. I know I am asking everything of you, but there is nothing else you can do.”

“ I can scarcely believe it is not all a horrible dream. It is so hideous, so monstrous. But you ! I hate you—hate you !” The contrast between the magnitude of the cause she had for that feeling, and the hopelessness of retrieving anything by it, swept through her. She was carried down to despair on the wave of a sob. “ Oh, why did you bring me to this ?” she wailed.

CHAPTER XVIII

RECOGNISES A DESTINED ISSUE

HE was considerably afraid at entering her own home. Out in the street and under the stars she had felt for a moment a vague solace in her isolation, as if there were room for her in the world. But here in her own house it was as if she were intruding on the lives of others, and playing the part of an evil spirit among them. Her present despair was a weight on her brain. And yet through it all some hope shone—the hope that Mrs Hunter did not believe anything of what she had been told. The feeling was irrational, but she nursed it as the one thing that stood between her and utter ruin.

She entered the house softly, like a guilty thing, and stood irresolute in the hall. She was strongly inclined to shut herself in her room, so that she might place the night between her present horror and the inevitable interview with Mrs Hunter. But against that was the intense curiosity to know whether the woman had returned. That fact would partly decide how much she had to fear. Her passionate wish was, that she should have returned and gone to bed. She had so far persuaded herself of the reality of that hope that

she stopped with a start, at the door of the sitting-room, when she saw Mrs Hunter standing there and looking at her.

“Well?” said the woman, lifting her voice to a sharp clearness.

A chill swept over her, and she knew what she had to face. She felt in her weakness how abject would be her submission to the worst that could be said of her.

“I did not know——” she stammered; but struck with the uselessness of what she had been about to say, she stopped.

“You have been out?”

She looked down at the dust-stained dress and confessed in a whispered “Yes.”

“It is a nice night, too,”

She burst forth in a cry of anguish. “Oh, what do you mean? What do you think of me? Tell me the worst! Do you believe all that she has told you?”

“Can you explain to me why I should disbelieve it?”

“If you pitied me——”

“Pitied you! There are others more in need of pity. I confess it stunned me. You! Edgar’s wife! It seemed too horrible to be true. I don’t know how much I really believed until I came back and found you were out.”

“I went to follow you—to stop you from seeing her. I would have told you all myself.”

“I thought you went to see him,” she said in scornful derision.

“You are cruel—more cruel than any one could deserve.”

"You did not see him, then?"

"He met me. He was coming here, he said."

"To warn you, I suppose; to tell you that there was nothing to do but fly at once! Well, you can tell him from me that you are not going. You shall stay here till Edgar comes."

"Do you think that I would go with him? Are you a woman at all, to taunt me so!"

"And you?" said the other witheringly.

She shrank from the angry gaze. "God pity me!" she murmured, "I am not fit to die!"

Mrs Hunter was moved: the intense pity for her son that swept through her seemed to include even this guilty one. It was in the impulsive tender prompting that she had some claims of sisterhood, that she said: "I put Ethel to sleep in my bed; the poor child was crying when I came in. She had better be left where she is for to-night."

"Poor Ethel! But perhaps you will hide it from her. That is all I ask. But why was I born at all? My life has always been a misery; not one day of happiness since—it is cruel of you all!"

The mother in her was roused. "It was cruelty that drove you to him, I suppose?"

"Oh, stop, for pity's sake! I do not ask anything of you but to spare me!"

"What right have you to ask anything at all?"

"None. I know that."

"No. You have chosen. O Kate, Kate, is it you who have sacrificed yourself like this? Both Edgar's honour and your own! How could you? It seems impossible even now." She hid her face in her hands, and quivered in a passion of sobs.

The younger woman was stricken below all

sense of her own humanity. She saw an agony of mind that awoke no echo in herself, and stood as if inanimate.

"But why did you ever marry him?" Mrs Hunter broke forth. "Was it for this, Kate? You might have spared him. Poor, poor boy! Had you no thought of him?"

She struggled to the feeling that reproaches were undeserved, that she had misery enough to bear. "It is because . . . you are his mother that you can be so cruel to me," she said calmly.

It was with a dull feeling of something false and unreal in herself that she went to her room. She lifted the blind, and looked out on the night. A bright moon was high in the heavens, painting the earth a silver white. There was a calmness in the scene that spoke to the sluggish beatings of her heart. Everything seemed motionless and serene, filling each its place in a cosmic world. A first faint whisper to be comforted awoke her to pain. Could even she hope for such calmness as this picture disclosed? Was it that she had but to pass the gate of death.

She heard the closing of the front door, and then, with the passage gas turned out, the house was in darkness. Mrs Hunter had retired to her room, and she had some hours of freedom before her. The sense of license had never been so rampant in her blood as now. She had sacrificed all ties and stood alone, responsible to no one. The feeling that there was but one thing for her to do was like a mockery of her mood. But, when weighed in contrast to the little that she could really hope for, she was captivated by thoughts of its matchless purity.

Yes, she would find her escape there ; in the way she had every right to do, as indeed she was compelled to do. She saw, how vain and even corrupt had been her old wish to escape the consequences of her sin. And her reunion with her husband, coming back to her, revealed its inner meaning. It had been their loving good-bye—for ever. She felt a new joy in its possession. She contrasted the repinings she would have endured in following out her purpose if such reconciliation had not been given her, as against her present ease of mind.

But there was time before her, and confident of the strength of her resolution she felt no need of haste. She would put everything in preparation, and so reduce the unavoidable confusion to a minimum. Edgar would not be back for almost a fortnight, and she would live through the days until he was on his return. She would not see him again, but he, arriving in time to see her lying cold, would forgive her. She clung sentimentally to the picture of that meeting, but pitied him his share. She felt a weeping sorrow in the consciousness that in doing what was best for him, she must still pain him. Yet that was but the ordained manner of events in the world. She wondered where she would be at that meeting, whether it would be seen or unseen by her.

In the soft influences of night her thought was obedient to her direction. Death was the one thing that offered forgetfulness, and she realised that as a sufficient reason why she should welcome it. But she was surprised at the calmness with which she had accepted it; she, who had always shuddered at every thought in its direction.

CHAPTER XIX

SEIZES THE OPPORTUNITY OF ESCAPING FROM IT

SHE slept quietly, but in the morning woke to the conscious pain of life. She knew instinctively that her mood of resignation had vanished, and she feared the import of the change.

She had a sense of antagonism to the events that had smitten her down—a feeling that did not harmonise with repentance. She looked about the room, her heart beating tremulously at the bare thought that her eyes were soon to close on these familiar things. Every act that she performed spoke of her approaching end as if to make her afraid. She had now to argue with herself that death was her only escape. She had to review its advantages, but, in spite of all, she failed to make it acceptable to her heart. Her mind seemed to willingly admit that it was the imperative course, and indeed the only one, yet it was in active protest against submission. But come what would she must do it. She was sure she would have strength for it, and indeed was definitely hopeful that she would sink back to quiet contented acceptance of it.

She was aware of a recovery out of her physical distress, but did not connect that fact with a desire for life. She would have preferred to feel ill, so that she might confine herself to her room. She had the most abject fear of meeting Mrs Hunter, and was wholly undecided what line of conduct to pursue. She left the blinds down, in order to have the room darkened, and lay quiet, reviewing in saddest mood her past life, and finding how undeviating the pitiless course of it towards the present moment had been.

Tender memories which made the present seem monstrously unreal swept over her. It was all a hateful dream ; it could not be true ! She, whom a mother had fondled had not sunk to such a depth ! Her mother ! Had she lived to be afraid of that name ? It was nothing but a dream—a dream that had wearied her with life, weighing so heavily in even waking moments that she could not escape from the shame of it. But with all its terrifying aspects it fitted in with reality. In piteous anguish she realised the sadness of her failure at delusion. It was all true—true that she was afraid to speak her mother's name.

Death must be her choice. Of what was she afraid that her heart should quicken in its beatings as if in protest ? She was not afraid ! She would act now. She would take that method of convincing herself of her strength. But no, she must wait for Edgar's return. Every feeling that made her woman cried out for that. Let her death partake, in so far as it might, of the nature of a sacrifice, and less of the act of a mad escape from herself. But it meant more than a week of

waiting. Could she hold out that long? What changes could happen in that time? what changes had happened in less than that? But in her life nothing could change the past. Its hue was unalterable—a terrifying blackness. And yet it was cruel to ask her to endure life so long, if crueler still to compel her to seek an immediate escape. How could she meet the daily round, and in her heart know and realise her mere evanescent relation to all about her. It seemed impossible that her spirit could live under that strain.

She heard the footsteps of Mrs Hunter and Ethel, but they seemed softened, echoing of the subdued manner of an act of reverence for the dead. She smiled in sad contemplation of how prospectively appropriate was their conduct. She had gone out of their lives; her death sentence had been passed; she was but awaiting the ordained time of execution. She had no wish for reprieve and saw no possibility of it.

She listened longingly for a knock at her door, for an acknowledgment of her existence, but none came. She saw the cruelty of Mrs Hunter, who was forcing her to the final consummation of her despair. There was no hand outstretched to save her as there should be. Why did not Ethel come near her? Perhaps the child had been told that her mother was not fit to associate with her. Was she never to kiss the child again, or hold her in her arms? Did Ethel in her nature possess something of the cruelty of her grandmother? Did she understand all? Was she unforgiving? If so, she must meet death now; she could not longer endure life.

Later in the morning the sound of a gentle tap startled her to the realm of fear. Who could it be? Her husband? That was impossible; and yet it could be no other. She stood shivering, and listening to the painful beatings of her heart. The intensity of her agony seemed to threaten to sever the frail thread of life.

"Are you better, muma dear?" said Ethel's voice.

The sound, like a wave of sweetness, swept over her, and stilled the wild beatings of her heart. She opened the door quickly, and looked down with eager tenderness on the upturned face of the child. She saw a loving contrast to the accusatory one she had been torturing herself with expecting. She caught her in her arms, and carried her into her room, deluging her face with kisses.

"You are better, muma?" whispered the child, caressing her.

"My darling! my darling! How can I ever leave you?"

"You are not going away? Dada is coming home soon."

"Ah, yes!" she said with a shiver. "Home to his darling Ethel! While I—— O God, have I forfeited it all?"

"Don't cry, muma; you mustn't. Dada will soon come back. Grandma says perhaps the day after to-morrow. She sent a telegram for him because you were so ill."

"What?" she cried with a start.

"Muma, come close," said the child, catching at her hand.

She was unmoved by the entreaty, and stood as if in stupor. "Your grandmother sent a telegram!"

"Because you were so sick, muma. She wants dada home. Don't you want him, too?"

"The day after to-morrow! So soon as that? Oh, why do they persecute me? It is cruel! How pitiless you all are! And he knows now what I have become! I cannot bear the shame of it! With what feelings of contempt and disgust he must regard me! I cannot bear that he, too, should be so cruel! O God! O God! it is cruel of You, too!"

Ethel was by her side, struggling to nestle close, a childish whimper on her lips. "Muma, don't," she said, "you make me cry, too."

"Run away, deär," she said with a shiver. "I am not fit—— Your grandmother wants you."

"She doesn't, muma. She has gone to Mrs Clarke's. And she told me I wasn't to knock at your door; but I did. I don't like my grandma any more. She has not been kind to you, muma; has she? And I won't kiss her again, even!"

"She has gone to Mrs Clarke's," she echoed with sudden interest. "Now, I wonder what that is for? You are sure she is not in the house, Ethel?"

"I saw her go out of the gate. And I don't want her to come back till she promises to be good to you. She said I wasn't to knock at your door, that is why I waited till she went out."

"But you must not talk so of her, Ethel. She is good—even if she is not good to me. She is a good woman, and that is more than—— Tell me, Ethel, if you knew your muma was a bad, wicked woman, would you love her still?"

"You are not bad, muma; you are not!"

"I am, Ethel," she answered with studied steadi-

"No, muma, no!" said the child caressing her.

"Would you love me?" she questioned. Her heart seemed to wait for the answer.

"You are not bad, muma?"

"Ethel, I am."

"Well, who said so?"

"Every one will say so."

"They won't; and I don't care. You are my muma; you are not bad. Dada won't say so."

"Won't he, dear?" she whispered with a sob.

"No, of course he won't. And I'll tell him how wicked grandma has been. Did she say you were bad?"

"And you love me, Ethel?"

"That much, muma," she answered, clasping hands round her neck.

"You really love me? You are not afraid of me?"

"I am not afraid of my own dear muma," she said, looking up in question.

"You would not like to lose her?"

"I will not lose you. I will not let you go anywhere without me."

"You will come, too?" she questioned.

"Yes, muma."

"You would like to come with me?"

"Where, muma?"

"Ah, child, I do not know! Perhaps to meet your dada."

"Really, muma!" she cried in delight.

"No, Ethel. I must go—somewhere. But you must stay to meet him when he comes. And tell him—ask him to forgive me—I mean, forget me."

"Muma, don't! You frighten me when you say those things. You mustn't go."

"Run dear, and see if your grandmother is coming back yet. I cannot stay here ; I dare not."

She made nervous haste to dress herself, conscious of the incompleteness of her intended movements. She must go away ; Mrs Hunter's interference on the question of her husband's return had altered the complexion of the whole matter. She would not be driven. How could she hope to appeal, even in death, to his forgiveness, when he was returning with full knowledge, and with feelings of deepest loathing ?

Of what was to become of her she had no definite thought. Death was to be her ultimate and not very distant aim, but for the present the necessity of action forced her to an outlook on life. Her mind was occupied with hope and fear. Could she escape from the house before Mrs Hunter returned ?

Ethel stood at the door, watching with wondering eyes her mother's preparations. "Grandma is not coming yet. Where are you going, muma ?"

"You cannot come, Ethel. You must stay to meet your father."

The child ran to her in a passion of weeping and clasped her dress. "I will come. You must let me come, muma ! You are going away !"

"Hush, child ! don't cry so."

"Let me come, muma !"

"My heart is breaking, Ethel. Do not torture me."

"Do let me come, muma ! I shall be so good. I won't stay here with grandma."

"She will be good to you, Ethel," said the mother.

"I am going with you, muma. You will let me go. Say you will."

"And what will your dada say ? You may never see him again."

"We will go to meet him."

"You might, Ethel, but I cannot. Did I not tell you that I am a wicked woman and that you—should hate me."

"O muma, don't!"

"Do you love me then, dear?"

"Yes, of course I do. Will you let me come?"

"I do not know, child. I ought not to, but—Ethel, if you stay, I will come back to you some day. I promise faithfully." Her mind was awake to the difference between the full significance of her words and a childish estimate of them. She recognised herself as reduced to sound at every step the vital chords of existence, and never again to move in an element of unheeding innocence.

"I want to go with you, muma," said the child. "You are not bad. It is only wicked grandma who thinks so, and dada will be angry with her when he comes."

"Kiss me, Ethel, then," she drew the child close to her in a passionate embrace. "My darling, good-bye!"

Ethel sobbed anew in despairing accents. "I won't let you go! You must take me, too!"

"Run and get ready then."

"Really, muma; you will take me? I'll be so good. I won't be in the way; I know I won't."

She followed the child, and securing the key of the door, she turned quickly and locked it. She waited long enough to hear the outcry of despair and childish hands beating against the door, and with choking hysteria she ran back to her own room. She caught up her hat, and ended her preparations for departure, deadening her senses to

the passionate entreaties of the child, then, with a mother's anguish, listening to them.

The fear nearest her heart was of Mrs Hunter's return, and it drove her onwards. So intense was her dread that it dulled her sense of much that was happening at hand. Her parting with Ethel she realised as over, yet felt she would in future moments recall its monstrous unreality with unavailing torture. The child's anguished outcries continued, but she heard them chiefly as an increase of her own suffering.

In the street the world seemed to her senses to widen out. She felt that her refuge was in the open; the unknown beckoned her. The intensity of the moment permeated her whole self and made her mind pliant to exaggerated suggestions. She saw nothing about her in its ordinary reality, yet felt that she pierced to the inner significance and inter-relation of all. Visible things revealed themselves to be more impressive than she had ever conceived, and in a strange way she felt that she had part with them. It was an ashamed part; but how much better that was than to be disowned!

The wind blew in her face—a cruel omen of the world's threats against her. Yet she felt it an encouragement, because it seemed to blot out all traces of her escape. She heard suddenly the noise of running footsteps close behind her, and, turning at the impulse of a vivid indefinable fear, met Ethel as she fell at her feet.

"O muma, let me come!" she cried in an hysterical gasp.

The mother felt inspired by a gleam of selfishness;

with a delicious thrill she saw the promises of the child's companionship.

"You are not angry?" said Ethel in piteous entreaty. "I was so frightened there. You will take me?"

"My darling, we will go together!" she said.

There was now the utmost need of haste. Mrs Hunter would follow them as soon as she knew that Ethel was not in the house. They were by a turn of the street out of sight of their own home, but that fact only quickened their fears. They could no longer know what was happening behind them.

Ethel, holding fast to her mother's hand, was absolutely no hindrance. She wiped away her recent tears. But the successful issue of her venture, in contrast to the black background of it, played upon her childish mind, exalting her to an heroic altitude. "I jumped out through the window, and I didn't hurt myself," she said.

"You might easily have done so, dear; you ought not to have been so foolhardy. But then you would not be here. I do not know, darling. I hope all is for the best; but I do not know."

"You are not angry with me, muma?"

"No, dear; I could not be. And I never shall be again. You are my little angel; all I have to live for. But I wonder how long it will last? It is cruel to him. Ethel, you have not thought of him! What will your father do without you? Darling, you had better go back."

"No, don't send me back, muma. We will write to dada to come to us, and he will come. I'll tell him how cruel grandma was to you, and he'll be angry with her."

"Poor Ethel!" she murmured to herself. "Where is it all to end?"

Having the child with her, and in an indefinite way to consider, a course presented itself to her mind. She saw a life before her in which she would have the peace necessary to prepare herself for what offered. And at the worst Ethel could at any time be sent back to her father. At the top of the street she secured a cab, and drove down to the Australian Bank. But with the custody of money, her fears seemed to increase. She looked back up the street, but saw nothing that hinted at pursuit.

The rattle of traffic, as some cabs raced down to meet the incoming train, set her shivering. She felt suddenly that she was but hurrying to meet her destiny, that at the station she would descend into the presence of Mrs Hunter and some constables. Even the cabman became in her eyes rhadamanthine and repulsive—a servant of fate. It was at some summation of courage that she spoke to him. "I don't want to go to the Central Station; take me to the next."

"This is the shortest," he said in half protest. "We are nearly there, ma'm."

"Turn back, or I'll jump out! I won't go there. Drive to the Monkland Station."

"I don't know if I can be in time for the Monkland."

"Try your best to reach it. I'll pay you well."

"Right, ma'm; I understand."

His recognition that her purpose was to escape seemed to make her more dependent on him, and to increase her alarm. But in the perceptible

increase of speed composure returned to her. She had leisure to notice Ethel's set face and firm grasp of her seat. The consciousness that she was exposing the child to all the dangers that threatened herself struck her like a blow.

The child's compassionate eyes turned on the horses, and she winced as the whip came down on them. Her mother, watching her, said in apology: "We mustn't miss it, dear. Everything depends on it for us."

She found it a vague satisfaction to look upon her life as dependent on the speed of the cabman's poor horses. She realised what a crazy thing life was when she staked her own on the small issue of being in time for the train. Here was the net product of her whole past. It had no other meaning but that on a certain day of her thirty-second year she should catch, or fail to catch, this train. Such was the jocose manoeuvring of fate, and she joined in the sport with generous recklessness.

They passed down the Apollonian Vale, their speed attracting some attention, a fact which Ethel noted with childish satisfaction. They shot on to the level of the Crown Road, but at turning the corner came up to a little child heedlessly crossing the street. The driver shouted, a woman on the footpath screamed, Mrs Hunter stood up, livid with terror, and they flew past, leaving the child looking after them with a smiling face, as if in denial of there having been cause for fear.

"He doesn't seem to mind, the little beggar!" said the cabman, moved to familiarity by their recent kinship in alarm.

But Mrs Hunter sat rigidly lifeless, her eyes staring and unnatural, her whole aspect that of one terror-stricken by the picture of some imagined scene.

"Muma, don't look that way!" cried Ethel. "You are going to faint."

The child's voice released her from her direful captivity. She turned her eyes to Ethel and fell forward, weeping the passionate tears of weak womanhood.

It was chiefly such weakness that debarred her from the cynicism of recognising the incident as sportful Fate's protest against her willing acceptance of his usage.

CHAPTER XX

DEALS WITH REVERSED POSITIONS

THE news of Mrs Hunter's flight was at first a staggering blow to Haddie. It seemed to him for the moment as if he had been deserted and left to face issues from which she shrank.

But close consideration seemed to reveal it as a half surrender to himself. She intended him to follow her. Such was her manner of accepting the offer of his devotion. She had seen that it was the only course possible, and she had determined to trust him. That view of her fanned his passion. She was the one woman in the world for whom it was worth while to begin everything anew. He had an absolute delight in breaking with all ties for the sake of joining her.

Of course she had gone to Sydney, where most of her life had been spent—the one city she knew. By taking the first train he would reach there twenty-four hours behind her. Once there, he would have no difficulty in discovering her; indeed her aim would be to make it easy for him to find her.

At the end of a fortnight in Sydney he had to readjust his convictions in regard to her. The fact that he had not come across the slightest trace of her was a mocking insistence on the vanity of his

earlier conclusions. It was plain to him now that she was in hiding; her aim in running away had been to escape him quite as much as the others. He had to admit that the city was big enough to swallow her up from his eyes. And in the feeling that he had nothing but accident to depend upon, he sank to a depth of hopelessness. Was it not hatefully possible that in the fear of being followed, she had not come to Sydney at all?

His anger against her for refusing his offer of life-long loyalty gained force. Since she had chosen she must abide by her choice. Pity for her in the punishment he had brought upon her he must ever feel. But in recalling that even in the crisis of her despair she had discarded him, he acknowledged her strength to meet punishment.

The feeling that she had cast him off for ever was a first step towards forgiveness of himself for his part in her ruin. He had offered her the only reparation in his power, and it had been refused. He was now justified in forgetting it all. There remained the question of what was to become of himself. For all sorts of reasons he could never go back to Gympie. He would stay where he was, and let events decide what he was to do. In his failure to find her, his life seemed to have been robbed of every purpose.

He wondered that he did not meet Fred in his wanderings, yet could but rejoice in the fact. Kinship in his experience had never meant much more than identity of interest, and, with that tie dissolved, his active concern in his brother had vanished. But Fred, if they met, would consider himself at liberty to ask questions, to all of which answers of

some sort must be given. Whether he were to tell the truth or not would matter little ; his irritable spirit chafed at the prospect of having to answer at all.

The days passed slowly. He kept to himself, making no acquaintance at the hotel. He confronted the blank wall of inaction, conscious that he must decide for himself, yet unknowing what to decide. He spent much of his time in the streets, in the purpose of wasting the hours before him. He tried to accept his dejection without letting his thoughts dwell on the reasons for it. But his efforts were wholly futile.

It was in protest against the unanimous hurrying of all about him he stood still at a corner of King Street. He felt bitterly the intensity of his loneliness, and hungered for a word of kinship. With a vivid sense of the magnitude of the reward of his humility, he saw Minnie Turner advancing to him.

"How are you, Haddie ?" she asked, in delighted surprise. In realising an excess of cordiality in her greeting, she became aware that it had its basis in an ashamed remembrance of a terrible injustice she had done both Alison and him.

He was amazed in recalling that no thought of her being in Sydney had occurred to him. Her holiday here was a fact of which he had previously been quite aware, and yet his mind, centred on one object, had suffered it to be obliterated. "I was hoping to run across you," he said.

"I didn't hear you were down. When did you come? Do you know you are not looking at all well?"

"I needed a change," he answered. He was anxious to avoid personal questions, anxious to live

in the belief that this meeting had been fore-ordained to rescue him from himself. "But you are looking well," he added.

"I certainly feel so. And I don't want to go back yet; this is all such an improvement on Gympie. But how did you leave the dear old place?"

"It is very dull just now. There is no news of any kind to give you. What is the latest you have heard?" Her willingness to speak to him was evidence that she knew nothing of Mrs Hunter's flight. Doubtless there had been a successful effort to keep the whole matter secret.

"I have not had a letter—for I don't know how long," she said. "The mater is not fond of writing. Have you been down long?"

"Nearly three weeks."

"So much as that!"

A correlative question swept through his brain. "I did not know where you lived."

"You have been enjoying yourself, I hope?"

"I can't say that I have."

"I am surprised at that. A man!—you could go anywhere and everywhere."

"I haven't had much inclination to go about here."

"Are you going further—on to Melbourne?"

"I think not. And yet I may. I am altogether undecided."

"You are not thinking of going back already?"

"Going back!" he echoed. "Not for some time—perhaps never."

"Really, now! I'll take you back with me if you dare to insinuate anything against Gympie."

"That is how I feel at present," he said, with an affected laugh. "When are you going back?"

"About the end of next week. Isn't it sad?"

"I suppose you will be sorry. But then you have your parents to go back to—a home—" He caught her eyes bent curiously on him, as if to discover the whole tangled web of feeling that prompted such sentiment. He wondered how much she could find out instinctively in looking at him. In a hateful sense of his guilt he was afraid of horrifying her feminine innocence in some unconscious way.

Calmness came back to him, and he felt a faint re-awakening of the old sense of prerogative that had commonly been his in her presence. He realised the fact of her being well dressed as a personal satisfaction, and he wondered if his fancy were correct in supposing her to be better dressed than he had ever seen her, or whether the present circumstances but combined to picture her favourably to his mind. It was certain that she looked very pretty, and he cherished the feeling of possession that came to him.

He felt that she was not quite the same as in old days, but was uncertain whether the real cause was in her or himself. She seemed older; her young girlish forwardness had settled down into womanly independence. She appeared in some mysterious way to fit the scene, to connect his Gympie life with the present, omitting the disastrous incident that had driven him here. In her presence he felt freed of his burden of despair.

"By-the-bye, how was Mrs Hunter when you left?" she asked.

The question was so surprising from its apparent inconsequence that he was visibly alarmed at it. He could but see in it her knowledge of some facts, her suspicion of all. "Mrs Hunter!" he stammered. "What do you mean?"

"She was well, was she not?"

"Oh yes, she is quite well—so far as I know." He was so relieved, that in the unrestrained sense of freedom he stumbled on an indiscretion. "You have not heard anything—that she is not well?"

"No, I didn't mean that. I have had no Gympie news for quite a long time. It must be more than a week since I have had a letter. I was just enquiring about her. We used to see a good deal of one another."

He looked smilingly at her, yet, remembering that she had heard sufficient from Maud to render her suspicious of him, he blamed himself for having given grounds for the growth of her distrust. But his common habit of regarding himself on the safe side partly relieved him from fears. "Of course she had been ill; but that was before you left. I understood she had quite recovered."

"I am very glad of that. She wasn't by any means strong."

She invited him to call on her sister, whom he had known very well before her marriage. In the wish not to be deprived of her near presence he asked to be allowed to go home with her so that he would know the house. He was laughingly informed that he would have to wait for her while she did some shopping, and he could but gladly accept that arrangement.

He wondered at the sudden feeling of deprivation

at her departure. It was as if he had been dispossessed of some degree of the happiness decreed for him. He nourished the fancy that she had been sent to rescue him from his wretchedness, and robed it in radiant colours. Her visit to Sydney had unknowingly been for this consummation, for his regeneration. He halted, with some surprise at that conviction.

He marvelled at the impulse that had prompted him to interweave her life and his own. A thought sprang at his heart. Was he in love with her? He momentarily recoiled, but came back to a nearer contemplation of the idea.

A proof of the possibility was the partial inefficacy to justify the first feeling of aversion. He could think it had chiefly sprung from a deficient estimate of the circumstances, in the failure of the momentary present to at once outweigh the years of the past. Was he in love with her? It was still a question, but one that gained strength by its repetition. "

The one strong protest against surrendering himself was in his past estimate of her. He had always regarded her as a dreadful little hypocrite, whose chief object in life was to flatter people socially above her for the sake of their patronising friendship. He had looked down on her, from the standpoint of an advance of years, and had in cynical toleration enjoyed watching her. In the common masculine way, he had thought that the desire for a husband was the mainspring of her conduct.

But now, with the hope of escape from himself, his blood was responsive to the thought that this past view of her was almost wholly wrong, and also to the

fancy that she was a new Minnie. He clothed her as a wife, and saw that picture in such attractiveness that he was not ashamed to be in love with her.

He studied her as she came to him out of the shop, and surrendering to the magnetism of the woman in her, he realised his own unworthiness. His impatient remembrance of his guilt inspired a vague feeling of having been betrayed into it. He himself could never have been so superlatively stupid as to voluntarily sacrifice the right to stand side by side with her.

"I was not long," she said.

He looked at her, the sound of her voice was music in his ears. He dared not break the harmony by answering.

Catching a tram, they passed out of the busy streets into the region of imposing dwellings. They sat together, speaking at intervals. The girl had some satisfaction in his company other than the natural one of an affinitive presence. She pictured her advance on the girlish self who had loved him, and was glad to be assured of the certainty of her own superiority. She felt now, more vividly than she had ever done, the relief of being free of her old sentiment towards him, and in a vague way she tried to discover what qualities in him had first summoned love. She made no attempt to disown her girlhood, though she looked back at it with some pained surprise at its unmaidenliness. To have consciously loved him was in her present vision a wayward, passionate thing, and she wondered that she had not regarded it so from the first. She could not contemplate an unrequited passion as part of her present self. She

looked up at him, as if in corroboration of her thoughts, and, remembering how she had once looked with other eyes, her blood tingled in faint womanly shame.

They got out of the tram, and passed up a quiet street. Small cottages, built a few yards back from the pathway, looked out on them. There were gardens in plenty, the products of industrious half-hours. The trilling note of a canary rose on the air. They caught a glimpse, through open doors, of the front-room furniture in the homes of city clerks of small salary.

"Here we are at the gate," she said, halting.

"Well, I'll leave you here, and I'll call any day that suits you."

"That means to-day, now, at once. Come in."

"No, Minnie, I really couldn't think."

"You have nothing to do. You said so yourself; so come right in. I can't promise you anything nice for dinner, but you'll make allowances."

"But Mrs Ferguson—I am afraid of being an inconvenience. I'll come to-night, if you like."

"I'll accept the whole responsibility. I know Bella will be delighted to see you. And, between ourselves, it is the anniversary of their wedding, so there may be something for dinner after all."

"It isn't that could tempt me. I really think it best not to. A family party——"

"Come for my sake if you won't for theirs," she said, with a glance of conscious impudence.

"The responsibility is yours, then," he said, opening the gate.

"I'll make all the excuses, Haddie. I am good at them."

"You haven't changed much from the Minnie I remember at Gympie."

"Ah! but I have, I am happy to say," she murmured with echoing emphasis.

He was conscious of a more acute sense of the charm of her presence in having been granted a longer continuation of it than he had hoped for. He looked searchingly at her as if in the thought of defining the force of her attraction.

He was clever enough to guess that the chief reason for his captivated contemplation of the charms of marriage was in the wish to face a new aspect of life, and forget his old self. Left to himself he saw no escape, but with a wife whom he could love and reverence, there was promise of a future. Of any further wrong in his marrying, he was not more than dimly aware. She would never believe him guilty of Mrs Hunter's ruin. Evidently nothing definite was known in Gympie, perhaps nothing would ever be known. Anything she did hear he would deny. His masculine outlook enabled him to think that he would be doing no wrong against her, unless she were to come to distrust him. His unconscious estimate of her was, that it was her whole mission to rescue him.

He lit the gas in the drawing-room at her request. Standing by her side, in a room new to him, he was conscious of a tremulous feeling of the fulness of life. He felt suddenly that he was a new creature, totally divorced from the one he had been—and passionately in love with the woman at his side. He longed to hold her in his arms, and press his lips to hers, and was tempted to employ the present moment. But he was visited by a

timid lover's foes, the fear that she would be unnaturally surprised, that he would fail to make his opportunity effective. He was fretful against the circumstances that denied her to him.

"You can sit down," she said, "while I go and find Bella. Entertain yourself as best you can. There is a book of views near you."

She nodded gaily and left him. His gaze followed her, and he was conscious of a sharp pang when she disappeared. But he was happy in the sense of regeneration that his love engendered.

He viewed the table and the walls for evidence of her handiwork, but found none that echoed of her. He recovered from disappointment in the thought that she had often been in the room, had perhaps only this morning arranged the ornaments that were on the table, had sat on the piano-stool and let her light fingers wander in sweet command over the instrument. And all this in total unconsciousness that he was to come to this room, and know he was in love with her. *

His nature being purified of much of its grosser vanity, he was surprised into a thought that he might not be able to win her. He shivered at the desolate contemplation of that possibility. He did not look for love from her ; he would be content to see that take subsequent growth. He remembered, with a pang of despair, the known unconventionality of her nature, and he smiled sadly in thinking that he had come to regret in her the existence of the quality he most admired. She had refused Fred. Strange that he had temporarily forgotten that, only to remember it at this unpropitious moment.

CHAPTER XXI

REVIVES A DEAD PASSION

AT a little delay she came back to him. He watched the sweet outline of her face, and his blood warmed at an impulse. Her abundant black hair struck a chord of feeling in his masculine nature. He wondered what it betokened, what physiognomical fact it symbolised. He was quietly confident that it offered some key to her nature.

"Bella is delighted," she said. "She will be here in a moment."

"She remembers me, then!"

"Could any one ever forget you, Haddie?" she answered mockingly.

He greeted Mrs Ferguson with some warmth when she came in. They had been children together, and in early years had attended the same school. With her marriage, eight years ago, her Gympie life had ended, and they had met only on those occasions when Mrs Ferguson had visited her mother. He had attended her wedding, and that had been almost his only meeting with her husband.

In his estimate she was not much changed

Her face was very like Minnie's. She had the same dark eyes, the same shaped mouth, though the lips were not as full, and the same decided chin. She was smaller in stature, and her figure was more developed, but she had not Minnie's head of hair.

"You haven't altered much," he said.

"But you have, I think. You are older and look—a complete man of the world. You are not at all what I expected you to be."

"You mustn't blame him for that, Bella," said Minnie, with exaggerated emphasis.

"Mr Clarke knows that I was only trying to say something nice about him," she protested. "And I would have succeeded, Minnie, if you had not been in such a hurry to interfere."

"I humbly apologise, Bella. And to show my sincerity, I'll ask Haddie to take the word for the deed."

"I think you have let her run wild in Gympie, Mr Clarke," said Bella.

"I am afraid we rather admire her audacity up there."

"Well, I don't think I would like to come back to live among you."

"Are the children all well?" he enquired.

"Like their father, they are suffering from colds, I am sorry to say," she answered.

"That is rather sad. How old is the eldest? He must be growing up into years?"

"He is six, a sturdy little fellow for his age. Indeed, they all enjoy good health, as a rule."

"They are all boys?"

"All boys!" she echoed.

He caught a look from her eyes that seemed to come from the centre of her womanhood, and soar beyond earthly conditions. It was a definite part of herself, and yet seemed to transfigure her. A sense of the separation of the sexes, of the sublimation of the dreamy rapture of the feminine one, swept through him.

Mr Ferguson arrived, and, shortly after, the dinner bell pealed out. Minnie had changed her dress for a gown, and now looked a more domestic figure. To Haddie there was a sweetness in every phase of her, and he felt, with a consciousness of the contradiction, that in this homely aspect, which was so new to his eyes, she was nearer to him than she had ever been. Her throat, denuded of ribbon, looked bare, and its soft whiteness set his blood tingling.

Later in the evening they had music in the drawing-room. The time slipped by, and shortly after nine Haddie spoke of going, but was persuaded to stay. Mr Ferguson retired, the need of taking care of his cold being sufficient apology. His wife begged to be excused while she attended to his medicine.

Haddie saw the favour of fate in being left alone with Minnie. But he was afraid that she might look up, and, reading his soul, be femininely dismayed by the suddenness of the discovery of his passion. "Play something more," he said.

"I am too tired." She stood facing him, as she got up from the piano-stool.

"How can you be?" he said, in mocking protest.

"Because we are such old friends," she answered.

"Then, I'll play something for you."

"Do! Something dreamy, that will make me think there is no to-morrow."

"Is there one?" he asked.

"I think so," she murmured. She noted, as he stood looking at her, that there was a new light in his eyes, and she wondered at seeing a phase of him that was not common to her remembrance. The indefinite feeling that something was to happen unnerved her a little. She realised vaguely the impotence of feminine defences; and stood unknowing and undecided.

He caught at her hand, "Minnie!" he uttered.

She was quick enough to frustrate his effort, and stepped back from him. "Don't!" she said. "Don't be foolish! Bella will see you." Her voice rippled unevenly, but she smiled at him to show she gave no serious interpretation to his act.

"What are you afraid of?" he said in advancing to her.

"I am not afraid," she said decidedly. "But—" She had retreated to the French doors which opened on the veranda. Her smile had faded, and she was bewildered with momentous, confused thoughts. She tried vainly to know her present estimate in regard to him, and in regard to her old love for him. Her feminine instinct had awakened to an impression which her mind emphatically contradicted.

"You are afraid, Minnie!"

"I do not know what you—" she said weakly. In attempting to recover to confidence, she added: "You are so strange. What is the matter?" Dimly she hoped to send him back to their accustomed standing of friendship. Yet she made

no further effort to escape, but waited—knowing instinctively that he would enfold her.

He took her in his arms, and looked down into her eyes. "My darling," he said gently, "you know that I love you."

She quivered in his embrace, and turned her face from him. Contradictions thundered in her brain, myriad impressions seemed to be struggling each for predominant place. He loved her! Her blood thrilled at her own echo of his words. Yes! but why had he not loved her in the first warm flush of her womanhood, when she had awakened to love of him? Why had he not saved her from the pain of torturing hours, from the shame that an unloved woman feels in loving? The whole world had been different to her then and now. Why most of all had he waited till her heart was dead to his words, till she felt the pang of despair and not the ecstasy of life in hearing them?

But fighting against her impulsive regrets was the pregnant fact that he loved her now, that the happiness which she had vainly looked for was offered her. Even while feeling the security of the life she led without thought of him, could her feminine heart do other than passionately wish for the return of the old days when he was the centre of her life?

"Minnie, darling, look up!" he whispered.

"Why, Haddie?" His simple request had alarmed her. Did he know her thoughts, and resent the injustice done him? Was she to be given no chance to return?

"O Minnie darling! My darling—mine, mine!" he murmured.

What was it that choked her from an utterance of a simple "Yes"? The piteous pain of a heart that could never be revived!

Her yieldance had been sufficient answer for him, but now the itching desire to hear the voice of her he loved awoke in him. "You do love me a little, Minnie?"

"O Haddie, I did, I did! You were all my life!" Where was her shame in making confession? She had none. She saw in a vivid, feminine way the necessity of justifying her surrender to him, but not the cost of it. An impassioned appeal broke from her: "Why can't I feel so now?"

"I do not understand you, Minnie!" he said. "You do not hate me—for anything?" The fear of her suspicions gave him the impulse to declare his unworthiness, but he was inspired by the prompting to dare all for the sake of the beckoning promises of a happiness with her.

"Hate you, Haddie!" she echoed. "No, I hate myself, I think. Oh, let me go! I should not have let you hold me like this."

"I love you, Minnie. That is my excuse, and yours."

"What a tangle it all is," she murmured.

"In what way, dear?"

"That you should love me!"

"That only shows what a rational world it is."

"But why was it not so, then?" she cried piteously. "Why didn't it all come out right then instead of waiting for this?"

"You loved me once, dear—in old days? And you cannot forgive me for having been blind?"

Darling, you must! Surely you have a spark of tenderness left."

"I feel that I want to love you," she said, hiding her face from him. "But I do not know why I am so cold. Oh, take me back again Haddie to my old self! Make me live once more; make me feel that you——"

"Make you feel how much I love you, darling? That will be sufficient. My poor Minnie! what a strange little girl she is!" He felt the thrill of a happiness that was supreme. She passionately wished to love him; his part was but to win her back. Could any task have been more captivating?

"Oh, I should not have told you," she murmured. "I should not have revealed one half of what I have said. Have I no shame?" She seemed to endeavour to gather her strength in a sustained breath, and then, as if conscious of the barrenness of the effort, she lay inert in his arms. He was startled by the quivering sobs which came as an outlet of her pent-up emotion. "Haddie, I do love you! I do, I do!" she whispered cryingly.

CHAPTER XXII

NOTES ITS PROGRESS AND FINAL EXTINCTION

THEY were reluctant to go back to the drawing-room. But there was reason, chiefly in the fact that Minnie refused him permission to inform Mrs Ferguson of their betrothal, and declined to give herself any hint of the matter. She explained that she wanted to have it a secret for one day at least, so that for some gladsome hours she might feel she was leading an inner life which the world could not guess at.

They stood in silence just within the doorway, their hearts tuned to intensity. Mrs Ferguson was not visible, but they sat down, Minnie having to insist on his taking the chair she decided for him. His untiring glance unnerved her a little. And amid surroundings that were entirely new, she could not quite credit the reality of all that had happened. In facing common facts of life, she could feel some shame in remembrance of the fervid sentiments of a revived love, and she was aware of the hovering fear that it would all slip from her memory—all but her own unmaidenly share. In terror of that possibility she sought escape from silence.

"I shall go for Bella," she said.

"No, don't. She will come presently—all too soon."

His voice dispersed the fears that had threatened her. "But I am quite frightened when you look at me so steadily," she said. "I suppose I am afraid you will see through me, and then——"

"Be fonder of you, Minnie! As if that were possible!" He got up from his chair, and came behind her.

"What are you going to do?" she asked from the centre of maidenly modesty.

"Nothing that you won't let me do, dear."

"Bella will catch you. And my hair must be in a dreadfully untidy state already; she is sure to notice it."

"It is very pretty hair. And there is such a lot of it that I would like to let it down—just to see how long it is."

"You'll do nothing of the kind. Wouldn't I look a fright with it down!"

"You would look lovely, darling!"

"Haddie, do behave!"

"I am behaving—like a lover. Do you look for anything else from me?"

"I don't know. All I do know is that Bella will be coming."

"If she sees us she will only go away again."

"But I don't want her to see us."

"It is what I want in this instance, not what you want. You don't want to be kissed now, but you shall be." It was torturingly hateful that his most rapturous moments should be haunted by a spectre of the woman he had ruined.

"Come closer, I want to tell you something," she said. He bent over her, and kissing his cheek, she immediately jumped up from her chair. He essayed to follow her, but she escaped to the passage door.

"You just sit down at once or I'll call Bella."

"Call her, and I'll tell her everything!"

"Haddie, you must not!" she said seriously. "You know I don't want her to know—that is, not until to-morrow. And you will have to be going soon, so do behave yourself."

"That is only the more reason why I should not. But come back and I will."

"You promise?"

"You haven't come back yet."

"Here is Bella now."

She assumed a very demure manner when her sister came in, and studiously kept her eyes down. There was a momentary silence, that to culprits breathed of discovery.

"It looks a little like rain," Haddie remarked to Mrs Ferguson.

"I do hope it will keep fine," she said earnestly. "Harry's cold will never get better if it is wet."

"Personally, I think it will keep fine," said Minnie in gentle irony. "Indeed, with such a momentous issue dependent on it——"

"Wait until you are married," said her sister, in haste to escape from her ridicule.

"I have imposed on you long enough. I shall be going now," said Haddie, extending his hand to her.

"It is early yet—comparatively so. But of course it is a long way into town. When do you think of going back to Gympie?"

"I don't know; my plans are very undecided." He sighed at being compelled to remember the reason.

"Well, of course we shall be glad to see you any time. Minnie will not be leaving us before the end of next week at least."

"I shall be very pleased to come out. But can't you persuade Minnie to stay longer?"

"Her mother wants her back."

"I don't wonder at that," he said softly.

"Perhaps we can go a little of the way with you," said Mrs Ferguson. "I have to get some medicine at the chemist's. The girl has gone out, and I have no one to send. Minnie, you don't mind? The walk will do us both good."

"I am ready when you are," said Minnie.

"I will just run and tell Harry we are going," said Mrs Ferguson.

Haddie came to Minnie's side, but she stepped back from him. "What do you want?" she asked.

"I think it is very wrong of you not to let me tell Bella. She will be disgusted with you for your secrecy when she does learn it."

"I don't think she will mind. And, anyway, I'll blame you when I do tell her."

"Dear one, you may. But what is to be my reward?"

"I'll see afterwards."

"No, now!"

"If you come near me I'll scream!"

"I won't be defied!"

"Can't you wait for to-morrow?"

"It is so far off—almost an eternity."

She had stood with a pretence of forgetfulness, and with his arms around her she became indifferent to everything but him. What did it matter if Bella did learn now? From what strange contradiction in herself did she wish her sister to be ignorant? What did anything count as against the rapture of feeling herself lost in him?

Her release came from him in his desire to obey her expressed wish. "Dear one, Bella is kind to us," he said.

"The whole world will be kind now; don't you think that it will?" she answered.

"Yes—since you are my whole world, darling!"

"I wonder if you think I was asking for that?"

"It is enough for me to be permitted to say it."

"You are permitted to say anything and everything."

Mrs Ferguson came back in time to disturb them, and they all left the house. Minnie tried to play with thought, to measure her happiness. It circled her boundlessly, she could not stand away from it, she was always its centre. She attempted to persuade herself that she had been dreaming, so that she might feel the chill of the world, and rush back to the warm shelter of his love. But she could not escape even for a moment.

"The chemist is not far from us," said Mrs Ferguson. "Just a little way round the corner."

"Bella always makes a point of living close beside a doctor and a chemist," said Minnie. "Their noxious proximity comes under the head of the comforts of life, I suppose."

"That is all very well, Minnie dear ; but I will laugh at you some day. Don't you think I'll be able to, Mr Clarke?"

"I am sure she will be quite the same—in fact nothing less than your sister."

"You mean she will be more my sister when she is some one's wife?"

"Don't, Bella!" protested Minnie.

They turned the corner of the street, and saw the light of the chemist's shop streaming across the pavement.

"You can go in, Bella," said Minnie. "Mr Clarke and I will wait outside."

They stood in the darkness of the awning with their faces to the door.

"'Mr Clarke and I,'" he echoed. "It sounds so hatefully, dear."

"Me and Haddie, then ; will that do? See, I sacrifice everything to please you—even grammar."

He came beside her, and attempted to take her in his arms.

"Don't, Haddie," she said. "People will see us."

"They will see me kiss you if they wait."

"No, they must not."

"You do not refuse me?" he said, in mocking surprise.

"I decline to be kissed in public."

"And I decline to be refused." He pressed his lips to hers ; she was submissive to their warmth, but suddenly started back from his embrace.

"Some one is there," she said, in maidenly anger.

He turned quickly, and fell back, terror-stricken for the moment. Mrs Hunter stood in the door-

way a picture of dismay, and looking for a way to escape.

"You here?" he said quiveringly. An unshaped fear ran through his blood, and left him motionless.

Minnie advanced to Mrs Hunter, who retreated into the shop; Haddie purposely came between them.

"Don't come near me," cried Mrs Hunter to him. "Have I not suffered enough? What is there left in me to ruin? Have you no pity, no mercy?"

Minnie stood in the doorway looking at her. The woman's manner was inexplicable to her. She felt that its inner meaning was far outside her experience. Words jingled in her brain devoid of meaning, yet she realised that the whole situation threatened a catastrophe. She caught a look from the terrified Mrs Hunter, and she felt suddenly that she herself was degraded in her part in this scene. She saw her sex as only a barren necessity of man's existence. Life thundered emptily in her ears, and she sank back afraid.

"What is the matter?" she whispered to Mrs Hunter.

"Don't you know? I have run away from home because—" She broke out in earnest appeal: "Minnie, for your own sake, do not let him go near you—do not let him touch you! He is vileness itself."

She knew now; the woman's words were but too pregnant with meaning. And she felt a despairing sense of how insistently the appalling facts had laboured to manifest themselves to her consciousness. Yet she could not realise it in his presence;

her heart was incapable of believing. She looked at him, and he turned his eyes from her; every inch of him seemed ashamed.

"Haddie!" she called from the centre of her recovered womanhood. It was less a question than an appeal to him not to sink to despicable depths. He was the man she had loved, and she felt herself identified with him.

He quivered from head to foot, but faced her obediently, his look less than human. It seemed as if he could not speak.

She waited in bitter contempt of this object of shrunken despair. She had a warning consciousness that the words he would utter would be stupidly irrelevant.

"Forgive me!" he whispered to her.

CHAPTER XXIII

PRESENTS THE INESCAPABLE BOND OF SISTERHOOD

IN the silence of her own room she felt sick with impotent despair. She realised how deep was her shame; in their polluted presence she had not been able to do so. And appalling Fate, holding this consummation in its hands, had permitted her to feel herself loved. The cruelty of that was unnameable. The intense horror of it swept through her blood.

To have this remembrance that she had been loved by him would have been hateful enough; a sufficient shame to any woman. But no, she had been chosen as a supreme example of what shame one could feel. She had gloried in loving him. Her nature was intense, and because it was so, because she was gifted with qualities that lifted her above her sex, she had been chosen to be cast down to lowest degradation. She faced defiantly the God her wronged heart conceived—and burst into tears.

Yet in the morning she awoke to considerable recovery. She had slept well; her complete exhaustion had made that demand upon her.

She had some vague regret at having escaped in sleep from the pangs of a mental shock. It tended to lessen the aspect of her despair, to make it seem less than it was.

But her awakened moments were soon echoing with remembrance. Misery threatened to be permanently beside her. But her remorse was her own, and a secret from the world. She must bear it, but no one need know of her burden. She shivered in recalling how openly she had given herself to him. She had lost herself in love of him. She found it useless to attempt to deny that. Her fearless heart had gloried in loving. She had told him that she would not sleep, that she would lie awake thinking of him. She was glad that she could point to a first accomplished denial of herself as the woman who had loved him. Yet how near she had been to lying awake thinking of him, and with thoughts far different from what she had promised herself.

The arrival of a letter in the afternoon stirred her to some confusion of emotion. It was from Haddie. The barren touch of it fired her blood with an indefinite promise. She was hazily conscious that the mere fact of his sending a letter helped her a good deal more than would the substance of it. She opened it hastily, hopeful, yet dreading it. Was it to raise her out of shame or to sink her lower?

Her eyes caught a word that calmed her like a voice—"Forgive." She settled herself to read it slowly. She already knew its contents. It commenced without address.

It revealed him in a vivid mood of repentance—

of passionate regret for his cowardly deception of her, and of bitter reproaches for the ruin he had brought on her friend. His intensity alarmed the girl ; in it she realised, as she had not done before, the torture that Alison had to endure. Her own share of wretchedness had previously shut her out from any sympathetic contemplation of the unhappy woman's condition.

He gave her the news that Ethel was very ill with typhoid fever, that the common report of the neighbourhood was that she would die. He humbly asked for her assistance in the urgent necessity of doing something to lighten the woman's burden. The child must be saved ; he was passionately insistent on that point.

He spoke of the known pitilessness with which women judge their sex, and appealed to her—little as he had the right, he confessed—to rise superior to that phase of her womanhood. Let him bear the shame of it all. He asked for her help—not in his own name, but in Mrs Hunter's. Would she find out if anything could be done, and let him know ? He was willing to do anything, indeed his only solace from torture was to repair in some degree the ruin he had done. But he knew that to offer the woman anything in his own name would but mean its contemptuous rejection.

But she found it impossible to look on Mrs Hunter with any forgiving spirit. If pity was her chief feeling, it was not a pity that moved her compassionately to her. She recoiled from lifting a helping hand in protest against Heaven's dealings with the woman. The magnitude of the events she was asked to take a healing part in

appalled her. The impending issues seemed to her above her interference.

Yet she had a sincere wish to do something. Could she but think that the path had been chosen for her, she would have gone forward fearlessly. But she was incapable of rising to that conviction. Neither could her sympathy for Ethel move her. If the poor child were dying, it could only be in fulfilment of the mother's just punishment.

It was to hide herself that Alison had come to Sydney. She felt drawn to a nearer contemplation of the isolation of mother and daughter. Why should she not go to them? Yet she shrank from the mission of merely sympathetic forgiveness. Would her presence be of any solace to the woman? could she bring her help? Yes, but it would not be help from Haddie that she offered. She would not be his messenger. She would not degrade the woman by the offer of assistance from the man who had ruined her. If she went at all, she must go herself; the reason must be within, not without her. The idea that must uphold her in the task was the sense of duty to her womanhood.

She felt that a new bond united them—the bond of hatred of Haddie. They had both been defiled by him, if in different degrees. Both had reason to feel shame in their remembrance of him. It seemed to her as if she might forget her own degradation in helping in some small degree to bear hers.

Yet out in the street she felt afraid of her task. She dared not speculate on her reception. Alison might misjudge her motive; she would prefer in any case to be left alone.

The mother was the parent figure of his thoughts. She saw Ethel's condition as influencing her reception, but not as deciding it. She could command no active pity for the child's sufferings, and was conscious of a deficiency in herself. Ethel's case called for a tenderer compassion than she was capable of bestowing. But she was to be released from her sufferings, she was never to have any part in her mother's shame.

She knew the house when she came to it. She knew it from Haddie's directions, and in her fanciful mood she felt that the outward aspect of it betrayed that it sheltered dark secrets. There was a sombre barrenness in the look of it that chilled her. Her heart beat fearfully as she went up the steps, but she was outwardly calm. She imagined that it was inevitable that the neighbours were inquisitive of her entrance to this tabooed house. Her knock stirred an echo, and the door of the house opposite seemed to open in answer. She looked across, and was relieved to find her fancy had misled her.

The time of waiting seemed interminable; her excitement reached its climax and subsided. Her nervous speculation as to who would open the door gave place to an indifference as to whether she was to be admitted. She had begun to consider how long the circumstances demanded that she should wait, how often she must knock, when she heard a footstep approaching.

"Can I see Mrs Hunter?" she asked of the housekeeper. She recognised in the woman a good-tempered Scotch type of face, common to her experience, and discovered a favourable omen in the fact.

"I don't think you can," she was answered. "She doesn't receive visitors. There is a case of typhoid in the house."

"Ask her if she will see me. My name is Miss Turner."

"You know her then?"

"We are old friends. Tell her she must see me."

"If you are sure you are an old friend, perhaps you had better go in without telling her you are here. You see, it's this way, she is so worried, that she might say she wouldn't see you in any case."

A bed was in the far corner of the room, with some medicine bottles on a table beside it, and a rocking chair heavily cushioned close by. Alison, with a startled gaze, stood by the table unable to speak. On the bed lay a thin, worn figure, only a shadow of the old Ethel. Her fair hair was gone, her face flushed, the eyes expressing an intensity that was dulled by flaccid features. She turned to Minnie as a new figure in her horizon, and addressed her plaintive protest to her. "Dada is sailing away in the boat. He won't come back when I call him. Why doesn't he come back? He will be drowned. You call him too."

"He will come back, dear," said Minnie, standing beside the bed. "You must wait a little. My poor, dear Ethel!"

"Look at the waves; they frighten me! The boat will sink!"

"Don't you remember me, Ethel?"

"The boat! the boat!" she screamed. "Dada will be drowned!" She turned her face to her pillows and sobbed in childish helplessness.

Minnie stood silently facing the mother. She knew that the woman was afraid, and that fact helped to lessen her own heart-beatings.

"Alison!" she said softly as the other sank her eyes.

The woman's breathing broke on a sob, and, raising her hands to her face, she burst into tears. Minnie put her arms tenderly about her. "Dear Alison!" she said.

"O Minnie, don't!" she said cryingly. "I don't deserve that any one should come near me. You do not know—"

"Hush, dear! I know that you are very much in need of some one to come to you; that is why I am here."

"But I can never look you in the face," she sobbed.

"You are quite worn out. You will be getting ill yourself."

"That would be the best thing that could happen," she murmured.

"Nonsense, Alison! I don't want to have to nurse you. I know I wouldn't make a very successful nurse; that is why."

"You don't think I would want to get better?" she said. She saw the girl's distress, and confessed a fault. "But, Minnie, you are here. I will think of nothing else but that. How can I show my gratitude?" She added thrillingly at a pause: "But my shame clings to me. Night or day, I cannot escape from it. The horror of it will drive me mad."

Minnie lifted her face and kissed it in the hope of carrying her away from her thoughts, but the

stricken woman shrank from such evidence of the girl's pity. It was in gaining a little that she realised how much she had lost.

"O Minnie, I wish I were dead ; anything but this !" she murmured.

"Don't, dear, you will make me cry, too, if you carry on that way ! Ethel will get better."

"Do you think so ? I don't know what the doctor's real opinion is, though he talks hopefully enough. He says we must wait for the crisis—in three more days. If I could feel sure she will get better, I would bear all. I would send her back to him. Do you think he would take her ? Sometimes I think he wouldn't."

"Of course he would. I am sure he cannot live without her."

"But perhaps he has determined to put her out of his life, because she came with me. Think of all it means for her if he has. How shall I bear it ?"

"You mustn't brood so much, Alison. You must try to think of other things."

"She is asleep now, but she will wake up again, crying as you heard her. For the last two days she has been calling him like that."

"You must send for him."

She started back in horror. "Minnie, I cannot ! And besides, he would not come !" The weakness of that protest echoed in her brain, and she plunged forward in her defence. "You do not know what you are asking me ! But perhaps you think that I—" The girl did not speak, and the silence frightening her, shattered her strength. "No, you are right. I must send for him." She added with thrilling misery : "But I cannot—I cannot !"

"Shall I telegraph to him?" asked the girl, ignoring her contradictions.

"You, Minnie!"

"It must be done; don't you really feel that yourself?"

"Yes, yes, of course. But give me time to think."

"Decide now, Alison! You know it is best. And there is no time to delay—for both their sakes!"

"I know it must be done. I have felt that from the first. But what is to become of me? You do not think of that! I do not blame you; but still, what am I to do?"

"What he decides, dear. You do not wish to do anything else."

"You would not have me face him, Minnie! I could not; shame would overwhelm me. I must go away from here if he comes."

"You cannot leave Ethel!"

"I must, if you send for him," she answered with piteous anguish.

"He will understand why you stayed; why you sent for him!"

"He will not come."

"When Ethel calls him?"

"O Minnie, why did you come near me?" she cried. "You have made me more miserable. You have made my part harder. But no, Minnie, I am grateful to you. I should be on my knees to you. It is only the wickedness in me that cries out against you. I could stifle my conscience till you came. Send for him, Minnie! Say it is in Ethel's name, and he will come."

CHAPTER XXIV

GIVES A GLIMPSE OF WOMANLY WRETCHEDNESS

SHE left Alison early in the intention of despatching a telegram to Mr Hunter. She wondered what he would think in seeing her name as the sender, and was vaguely disappointed that the matter of it was to be of such importance as to overshadow any significance in that small fact. Nevertheless, she confessed to some conscious promise of an indefinite reward, which was quite apart from the feeling that she was doing the best she could for Alison. It was rather that she was offering her help to him.

She had previously sheltered herself from her sister's astonished questions regarding Mrs Hunter and Haddie in a stubborn assumption of ignorance. But she now welcomed the prospect of confiding in her. The successful issue of her errand had given her a new interest in life, in which Haddie's share in her own past was almost forgotten. She could now tell Bella of Mrs Hunter's wretched condition, without secretly feeling that she was also exposing herself. And the hope of gaining her sympathy for Alison was a promise of sustenance to herself in the responsibilities she had assumed.

Nevertheless she knew she would meet with difficulty in persuading Bella to look with forgiveness on a woman's dishonour. The common womanly horror of it might not intrinsically be a very wise thing, but its inherent reality was undeniable. But Bella would be able to recognise that the gulf which divided guilt and innocence could be a very narrow one, though she would have to go outside herself to do so. She would have to be made to look on Alison as possessing individual claims before she would feel forgiving towards her. And it was this necessity of pleading for the woman, the recognition that every individual would have to be pleaded with, that gave her a sense of hopeless weariness.

She attempted with some pretence of frankness, to decide whether she would send to Haddie any acknowledgment of his letter. She saw that her maidenhood demanded that she should not, but there was altogether another side. It was necessary that he should be told that Mrs Hunter did not stand in need of help from him, that all he could do for her was to take himself out of her life. In the event of his not being informed of that, he might conclude that no notice had been taken of his letter, and so feel impelled to resort to other means to learn her circumstances.

It was with a false calmness that she set herself to the task. She realised the necessity of quietening her rebellious heart. But the consciousness of the injury he had done her swept through her in all its hatefulness. She would listen to the demands of self-respect. Sooner than write to him, she would let Alison suffer again at his hands.

Reconsideration of the task served but to keep her from it, till at length her superiority drew her to look at it under new conditions. She saw how real was the claim of his torturing repentance to her forgiveness.

On returning to Alison the next day, she met the young doctor who was attending Ethel, and he spoke to her regarding the patient. She learned that he looked on the case as very serious. However, he had seen worse ones recover, and so was far from giving up hope. Typhoid seemed to be epidemical all over the colony just at present, but the number of fatal cases did not exceed the average. There was of course nothing for her to do, except encourage the mother. She stood in need of comfort and companionship; her presence would certainly be for good in that direction.

She felt the tedium of the day. They discoursed on common topics, but for Alison there seemed to be no escape from her mantle of shame. She was never free of it for a moment. There was no further allusion to it; they endured its presence in guilty silence. Minnie could not but contrast her present impressions of the woman with remembrance of what she had been. She had no vivacity of even a temporary kind; her spirit was broken. It was but a sad satisfaction to meet with occasional mannerisms of conduct and expression that she could identify as part of the Mrs Hunter she had known.

When the telegraph boy arrived she ran to meet him. She read the answer at a glance. He was leaving by the first train, and he gave her a Brisbane address requesting full particulars of

Ethel's condition to be wired there. Her heart was relieved of a burden; an atmosphere of encouragement surrounded her. He accepted her help! From that moment she felt invested with an increased concern in Ethel. It was as if she temporarily took his place.

She offered the telegram to Alison, and her refusal to read it startled the girl unpleasantly. But she recovered in seeing that Alison did not intend a reproach to her brightness, but felt only that she had no claim to any direct knowledge of his intentions.

"He is coming?" she said.

"He is leaving at once, he says. That will mean the morning train to-day. He will catch the mail in Brisbane and be here late to-morrow night, at that rate."

"Does he say anything else?" she murmured.

"He wants me to let him know how Ethel is keeping."

"I am glad for her sake he is coming," she said spiritlessly. "To-morrow night, you said! And I, Minnie, what must I do?"

"You must remain here, of course."

"Minnie, I could not face him!" she cried in nervous despair. "I knew from the first that I could not. It was only for Ethel's sake that I let you send for him. I must go somewhere."

"Where can you go?"

"I do not know. Only I must not be here when he comes. He does not—he says nothing in that telegram?"

"You could scarcely expect him to, dear. You are nervous and frightened, and will not under-

stand. You must see him ; I will be with you if you wish."

"What good can come of it, Minnie ?"

"You don't need me to tell you."

"Think of what it would mean to me ! You are not serious, Minnie ; you do not really ask it ! To look in his face ! My shame would choke me. I'll do anything he commands, but I will not see him. And he does not want to see me."

"We will leave it to him."

"I know he has blotted me out of his life."

"I do not think so."

"I tell you he has. I would despise him if he had not."

"As you will, Alison."

She was conscious that some dissension had come between them. She saw herself blamed for sending for Mr Hunter instead of being commended, and her blood answered to the injustice. Yet she tried to make allowances, and was partly enabled to do so in feeling that commendation was to come from him. She was not so ungenerous as to sum up the total of her efforts on Alison's behalf, but she had that prompting. Her resolution not to sink so low lifted her to some forgiveness of the woman.

Ethel lay in delirium, with occasional fits of half-consciousness. To Minnie she seemed worse than she had been—more restless, and her face more flushed. She found herself wondering how the child's battle was to end. What was the father's most earnest hope in that regard ? She tried to feel wholly identified with him in sentiment, but met with a conscious check. In the conviction

that circumstances must have changed him, she could not safely speculate on his tenderness. The vagrant fancy whether her admiration would deepen or lessen in a new aspect of him, held her fond attention.

She was sincere enough in her thoughts to be angry with the world that had dealt with him so harshly. She poignantly felt for him in that he had not met with the happiness he deserved. Her contemplation of the difference between his deserts and the world's usage of him, threatened to carry her out of sympathy with Alison.

She blushed to think how she swung between pity and reproach of the woman. She had no fidelity to her, she had none to herself. She acknowledged to both facts with shame, and in the attempt to account for the seeming vagrancy of her nature, she caught a glimpse of where her sympathy for him was tending. She recoiled in a nameless horror. It threw a baleful light on all her actions, and she shrank back, ashamed and afraid. Had this been the source of all attention to Alison, and she unconscious of it? Had she been so base? How far had she been subject to such an unseen influence? A quick denial of it all revived her. In her heart she held nothing more than friendship for him.

She encountered the necessity of wiring immediately as to the condition of Ethel. She had no active gladness in it, but saw it only as a duty. The check she had met with had forced her back to indifference at his estimate of the worth of her help.

She thought it odd that she should at this time

feel more in sympathy with Alison's tearful mood than she had yet done. It was not pity for the woman individually that moved her, so much as the recognition of the sadness of the womanly position in the world. Their part called for constant tears. She herself, if she were more feminine, might weep if only for the sufficient reason that she had nothing in all the world to be glad about. She confessed to loneliness at the same time that she would not acknowledge to a want of companionship.

"I suppose I had better send that telegram, Alison! What shall I say?" She looked studiously at her nails in her anxiety to avoid the woman's distress.

"Say that she is no worse—that the doctor says so," she answered in a low voice.

"That is about all that can be said." She did not raise her eyes, but felt that Alison had given her a searching glance.

"Did the doctor say anything else to you?"

"Nothing, except that to-morrow—well, that to-morrow she will begin to get better, of course."

She could not rise to Minnie's optimism. "Do you think that he will be in time to see her; that she will live—"

"That she will live to grow up a woman? Of course I do."

"I scarcely think so; sometimes I feel that I do not wish it. If it were best for her—do you understand! I know how dreadful it must sound in a mother; but no one but a mother can realise what I mean."

"She is going to live to brighten her mother's days."

"You are not ambitious for her, Minnie," she said with nervous crying laughter.

"Only for her happiness."

"Yes, Minnie, I hear you," she said wearily. "But even the word sounds strange to me now."

"I believe you would make me as low-spirited as yourself, if you tried. I feel very indifferent to-day about everything."

"It is this house, Minnie, and the people in it. It is a crime to let you come. I would not do it if I were in your place. It is degrading yourself."

"Alison, you must not talk so!"

"Oh, let me go on! Let me speak! Your protesting does not alter anything."

She answered meditatively: "To-morrow! I suppose all is for the best. What arrangements will you make?"

"Arrangements!" she echoed dully. "I do not know; he must do as he likes."

"Yes, of course; but about his finding the address! Shall I go to meet him—Mr Ferguson and I—and bring him here?"

"Yes, if you will, Minnie. He will not feel so strange if you are there. But it is very good of you."

The girl flushed under that designation of her conduct, but would not stoop to the conventionality of throwing it aside. "He will want to come straight here."

"I will tell the housekeeper; she can have a room ready. But no, he will not stay here—not in the same house. Indeed, I think it strange now that he should have decided to come. But it is for Ethel, of course Why did I bring her?"

Heaven pity me, for no one else will Why does he follow us? We could both die here in peace, troubling no one. I have thought of that—prayed for it. . . . Yet what am I saying? Forgive me, Minnie; do not listen! You must not remember against me anything I have said. And do you know I think that Ethel will get better now! His coming is a good omen. Would he come if it were not to take her back! It is so simple; and my part is, too." She looked at the girl with a glance that, in its affected sincerity, touched on mysteries.

Minnie went to the bedside and looked down on the sleeping child. She was half expectant that in her mission she might discover some message of hope or the reverse, which was hidden from the mother. She saw only that the child was breathing quickly, and with evident pain. To her nervous senses it seemed as if in fidelity to her mother's recklessness she were trying to expend her life. She had a half intention of waking her to remonstrate, till in the same vein she encountered the thought that both mother and child were plotting against the father's hopes. The very extravagance of that thought hastened its annihilation. She noted a change in the repose of Ethel's lips, and named it to her anxious heart as an improvement, and one of greater significance than she could interpret.

It was with a new sense of gladness that she went off to send the telegram. And she acknowledged to herself a feeling more suitable to the occasion than the one that had accompanied her on a previous errand.

CHAPTER XXV

HALTS ON THE VERGE OF A CLIMAX

IN the morning she received an answer notifying his immediate departure. He would arrive to-night! Her heart fluttered in contemplation of the moment of her own meeting with him.

She found on visiting Alison that there had been some attempt to give the house a better aspect of order. She liked the changed appearance presented, not perceiving that the change itself was the chief basis of satisfaction. But the deficiency in the general look of the house gave her the fancy that it spoke of the preparation for one whose entrance was insisted on.

Ethel started up in her bed as she came in. "Who is it, muma? Who is that?" she said.

"Hush, dear, it is Minnie—Miss Turner, your Sunday School teacher. You remember her!"

"My dear little Ethel is getting better," said Minnie, as she took her hands.

"Have you brought dada, Miss Turner?"

"He is coming to-night, dear."

"Won't he come now?"

"Just a little patience, dear one."

"I want him now," she said whimperingly.

"Hush, dear," said her mother. "He is coming to-night. You must try to sleep now."

She lay back on her pillows with eyes closed. Minnie noted the change in her. Her face was parched, her eyes vivid and unnatural, and her breathing more feverish. Moments of sanity and delirium seemed to follow one another in quick succession. Her question at Minnie's entrance remained with her. She at times started as if out of sleep with the words on her lips, and seeing no one, sank back without waiting for an answer.

"Has the doctor been?" Minnie whispered to the mother.

"Not yet; but he won't be long now. Do you think she is any worse?"

"She seems more restless perhaps; that is all. Has she been long like this?"

"Since early this morning. And yet I am glad in a way—that is, if it were not so hard on the poor darling. It occupies one's mind; keeps one's thoughts from other things."

"Poor Alison!"

"He will come to-night?"

To the girl's alert fancy there was some hope of a doubt. "Yes," she murmured half in regret.

"You have had an answer?"

Even to herself her admission amounted to some confession of guilt.

The woman felt some subtlety of contradiction in their positions. "Minnie, you may not believe it, but I am glad he is coming," she said. She pressed her lips in the attempt to command her feelings, but her bosom heaved, and her weakness

being that much in evidence to herself, she gave way and cried softly.

"Do not despair, Alison," said Minnie, caressing her.

"O Minnie, how can I face him! He must feel—— If I knew what he thought If I could be sure what he expected me to do! Oh, you will not understand. But my life is torture; I cannot bear it. Can anything be worse than this!"

They heard the doctor arrive, and Minnie ran to the door, impatient for his opinion on the change in Ethel. She followed him into the room and felt a quiet helplessness in surrendering herself to the mysterious mastery with which his profession endowed him.

"How is she this morning?" he asked softly of Mrs Hunter.

"Worse, doctor, I am afraid. Since this morning she has seemed much worse."

He bent tenderly over the child. A confusion of fancies smote upon her woman's heart. She felt suddenly that every innocent presence deepened her degradation. The consciousness that the next figure to stand at the child's bedside with the same clearness of knowledge as this one, would be the father's, swept over her, and she burst into tears.

The doctor looked up in surprise. He saw that her mother's heart had unnerved her, and he gave a directive glance to Minnie to take her out of the room. The woman was on the verge of hysteria, and Minnie endeavoured to quieten her with soft caresses.

"Don't give way, Alison, dear. She will get better."

The fact of the cause of her distress being almost wholly mistaken, together with her recognition that the question of Ethel's state ought to be her only immediate consideration, helped to calm her. "I wish I were dead," she murmured. "I wish it were I lying ill, instead of poor Ethel."

"Hush, Alison."

"It would be better so, Minnie. You know it would."

"I shall grow angry, dear."

"Why don't you, Minnie? Why don't you speak to me as I deserve? But I am so weary of it all. And to-night! O Minnie, why don't you pity me? But you do; I feel that you do. Why don't you hate and despise me, is what I mean. I am degrading you too. Why do you come near me at all? You must not come any more. Think seriously what I am, and you cannot."

"O Alison, how often must we go over it all?" she said protestingly.

"How often!" she echoed. "I do not know. Until I die, I suppose. What else is there for me to go over? Do you think I could ever forget it? Just think of my forgetting it!" She laughed hysterically, and on recovering herself, broke anew into tears.

The girl was smitten by a sharp sense of her incompetence. It had cost her much reasoning and strife to consent to contact with Alison, and indeed the chief reason of her surrender had been the prompting consciousness of how much good she could accomplish. Yet here she was not able to save the woman from one pang of misery. Her vivid recognition of her incapacity to perform what

her presence seemed to promise, threatened to cast her at Alison's feet for forgiveness.

They heard the doctor's footstep in the passage, and went out to meet him. "She will need close attention," he said softly. "I know I need not mention that, but of course—— If she gets worse —more delirious, I mean—you can send for me. In any case, I will come in the afternoon. You expect her father down to-night, you were saying! There is a good deal to hope for in that. If she is able to recognise him it will aid her recovery. I have given the housekeeper a new prescription, which you had better get made up as soon as possible. Give it at the usual intervals. And—there is nothing to fear just yet."

"Is she much worse, doctor?" whispered the mother.

"There is certainly a change. But we must look for that until the crisis is past."

Minnie followed him to close the front door. He turned to her, speaking with a quick earnestness. "It is a pity that train doesn't get in twelve hours sooner! If wishing could give it wings! Well, we can wish it won't be late. A strange world, Miss Turner, where so much depends on so little!"

"Will she die?" she whispered, in a voice that was scarcely audible.

"She is living still; there is hope in that. Something seems to be sustaining her—the wish to see her father! Only one is inclined to question the strength of that in a child of her age. Personally, I think she will see him—one clings to the sentiment. Professionally, she may not. But the father will

see her—she will not die to-night—should not, that is, as far as one can say. I have frightened you, Miss Turner! Only I thought it best some one should know, and the mother is not strong enough. You will keep it from her till I come this afternoon. Good-bye for the present."

She caught a look from his eyes that spoke of a tender sympathy with the world's afflicted, and she went back to Alison with feelings of intense pity which threatened to overwhelm her.

After returning home she waited restlessly until it was time to set out to meet the train. She at last assumed the courage to summon Mr Ferguson to attendance on her. They reached the station in good time, but found there were others there before them. Minnie asked herself whether any one was equipped on a mission more urgent than her own. She studied faces, and became dissatisfied with the knowledge she could apply to visible characteristics. She impatiently watched the movement of the clock.

"I cannot sit, Harry!" she said in excuse of her restlessness.

"No!" he answered in negative agreement.

Her fevered fancy encountered a variety of meanings from the word. How often had it been said in the world—and more for evil than good! Iron throats seemed to thunder it in her ears.

"It is a shame for me to bring you out at this hour," she said at a pause.

"I don't mind, Minnie. It is only once in a way."

"Once in an eternity!" she answered with a shiver.

"Do you feel it chilly?"

"No; do you?"

"There is a slight wind blowing."

"It will make your cold worse. Bella won't forgive me."

"I'll make her, Minnie," he said with a smile.

"Do you think the train will be late?"

"I see by the board it left Newcastle to time. It seldom is late. It is a curious thing that nearly all the accidents take place on the out train."

"I wonder why?" she said.

"Oh, if it comes to that, we all do."

She smiled through her weariness; she felt that he deserved that she should. "I thought there was a reason."

"So there is. But a different one each time."

"That is right, Harry; make fun of me! I only wish I could join you in it."

"I am very sorry, Minnie. I know how out of place it sounds. It was only that I wanted to get your thoughts away from this business, if I could."

"What do you think of me for mixing myself up in it?" she asked with sudden interest. "I would like to have your opinion. Come, Harry, tell me! And remember that I don't want charity."

"I think you have done more than any other girl in your place would have done," he said earnestly.

"You dear old silly; I want the outside world's opinion."

"Will there be any difference?"

"An appalling difference," she said quivering. "But I don't care."

"Here she comes."

They stood back, and the engine rushed past them. The very crowd of hurrying figures which issued from the carriages helped to calm the girl, and she felt how unerringly she would discover him if he had come. Her heart beat throbingly when she saw him looking about for her. She felt the pang of a strange new birth in confronting him.

He had clasped her hands and was holding them. His utterance of her name seemed to be wholly an expression of thankfulness.

“I am so glad!” she cried. She saw him before her, and in that felt that all difficulties were to be soon dispelled.

“How is she?” he asked.

“We called before we came. She is about the same—perhaps a little worse. The fever is at its height.” She felt that she was putting an unfavourable interpretation on Ethel’s state, and decided that the impulse came from recognition of the doctor as well as the father in him.

“How long has she been ill? Do you know?”

“About a fortnight! A little more than that I think. As soon as I knew—she consented—she wished me to send for you.”

“I can never thank you sufficiently,” he said.

“We must leave here at once. Let me introduce my brother-in-law, Mr Ferguson.”

They secured a cab and drove off without delay. Minnie’s eyes rested calmly on him; nor was she over conscious of modesty when he encountered her gaze. He made no further enquiry regarding Ethel, at which she rather wondered when she remembered how much remained untold. Was it

that his mind was already made up? She was loath to regard him in that harsh light.

"Is it much further?" he asked at length.

"Yes, some distance yet." It was in feeling herself that the minutes were speeding all too hurriedly that she realised how weighted they must be for him. What were his thoughts concerning Alison? Did he think of the woman in her, or did he see her only as his dishonoured wife?

"What doctor is attending?"

"Dr Stephens."

"No, I haven't heard of him," he said in answer to her glance. "A young man, perhaps?"

"Yes, he is young—about thirty-two, I should think. People say he is clever." Some concentration in his glance awoke her timid fears. She shrank from the question before it was uttered.

"Ethel's mother is well?"

She turned her face from him, feeling that she could not speak. Anything she could say would be so far from doing justice to Alison. Yet it was possible he would misinterpret her emotion. "She has suffered terribly," she managed to whisper.

She feared it was from displeasure with her more than from the wish to give her time to recover, that he turned at once to Ferguson with an easy freedom. "It is four years since I was here," he said. "How it all echoes back on me! Life is a big thing here in comparison. It was a mistake for me to leave the city, I think."

"Professionally, you mean! But the struggle in big centres is a long one, isn't it? Social influence and that kind of thing come first, ability being only a very secondary consideration."

"I admit all that; but still, compare it with life in a country place. You have not tried it, and don't know what it means. Ask Miss Turner about the joys of it. One knows everybody in the place, and sees too much of them to like them. Isn't it so, Miss Turner?"

She had a fancy that he was but quoting, in half mockery, a sentiment she had once expressed to him. She felt that he was consciously endeavouring to be unjust to her, and there was a mad satisfaction in the thought. "He ought to be made to try Gympie for a while," she murmured obediently.

"And how are matters from the business point?" he continued to Ferguson.

"They are very dull indeed—and small prospect of improvement at present. No rain up the country—a bad season!"

"What a haphazard way this world is managed!"

Minnie challenged his glance, but he would not meet her. She felt a thrill in realising the significance of that. It was a confession that any attempt to be ironically superior to his pain was doomed to failure.

"Do you live close by?" he asked her.

"About half a mile nearer town. But we shall not pass it this way."

"I had better let you down at your place, and then I can go on. Your direction will be sufficient for the cabman."

"No, we will go with you, if you do not mind. There will be less delay."

"But it is giving you too much trouble."

"Oh don't! Please don't talk of that!"

They turned off the main street, and the cabman slackened speed. "How far up?" he asked.

"The fourth house," Minnie answered.

"This one?" Hunter questioned when the cab stopped.

"No, the one opposite," she murmured.

The door was open, yet to her the house seemed more repellent than it had ever been. The night had to her fancy cast a deeper shadow over it than elsewhere. Her guess at Alison's expectant terror set her heart beating wildly.

"Leave my bag at that last hotel we passed, after you have taken this lady and gentleman home," said Hunter to the cabman. "You can say that I won't be there till the morning. But come back to me here; I may want you."

There was a forcible metallic note in his voice. Minnie knew it assumed to hide his emotion, but the very power to assume it amazed her. Her hand was in his grasp. he was saying good-night. She could not trust herself to speak, but gave a quick pressure to his fingers.

They were being driven back before she seemed to realise that he was gone. Unconsciously she had expected him to delay in parting. She turned quickly and saw him enter the house. Her brain sank under a weight of nameless terrors.

"That is our part over," said Harry with a sigh.

The sound of his voice sent a shiver through her. "Bella will be sitting up for us," she said.

A faint hypocrisy in the words smote upon her sensitive ear.

CHAPTER XXVI

MAKES THE DISCOVERY THAT THE CLIMAX HAS MISSED FIRE

IT was not until the morning that she discovered with some approach to a shock that she would not be able to visit Alison on the "old footing. Her presence there would now be an intrusion; every circumstance pointed to that. Forgiven or unforgiven, Alison had no need of her.

She sent Mrs Ferguson's servant in the afternoon to enquire concerning Ethel. She felt prompted to let her go in Bella's name, but took the straight course in the indefinite hope of meeting with a sufficient reward. The girl returned with the information that the worst was past, and the patient was slightly better, and it was hoped that tomorrow would see a greater improvement. She had an unutterable relief in receiving such news, and, in reviewing it, realised how deep had been her conviction that the child would die. She repeated the message over as if to better bring herself to full belief in it. So much more than she had regarded as possible was contained in it. A quick, sincere prayer of thankfulness went up unspoken. She breathed a new freshness in the air.

But there was no message in reference to herself. She questioned the girl, and found that the housekeeper had answered her knock, that she had referred the inquiry inside, and come back with the answer. The barrenness of the narrative chilled her blood. Why had she not been asked for? Because she had no part there, because he wished her to have none. She saw how his protest against her intrusion into his affairs could exist even side by side with his gratitude. That he was grateful to her she could not sink so far as to doubt, with remembrance before her of their meeting.

The morrow opened on them, giving promise of a golden day. Minnie noted as if in her blood how far separate it was from yesterday. It seemed as if the question of the continuance of her intercourse with the Hunters had been decided in the negative, and that without any appeal to herself.

In the afternoon she went for a walk alone. The day shone resplendent and carried her to thoughts of home. The air caught at each glad-some sound and lifted it heaven-wards. Life beat musically in her veins, her heart throbbing to the rhythm of her being—a hymn of thankfulness. The people about her were part of herself, and part of her happiness. Her kinship with them through Adam was a thing remote—even difficult to name seriously; but her kinship through the golden sunshine was a present fact that encircled her.

The near approach of a cab gave her a thought that sent her heart beating feverishly. Her eyes

could not identify it as the one in which they had come over, but her frightened heart named the occupant. In resentment against such complete surrender, she persuaded herself that he would pass even if he saw her.

It came as a half surprise to her that she herself should set her eyes straight before her as it went by. It was so silly, so feminine! She was on the verge of nervous laughter at contemplation of it when the stopping of the cab came as a sharp deliverance for her tensioned feelings.

But there were still many doubts of its having any reference to her, and she rather encouraged than flouted them. Yet she knew her "disappointment would be keen if it did not prove to be Mr Hunter. The remembrance that she had had doubts would not save her. She lessened her pace, letting her glance wander vagrantly at the houses and gardens at her side. The silence seemed an eternity—the moments clung to her as if reluctant to yield her up to him. She marvelled that they should so misjudge him.

"Miss Turner!"

Her start was no pretence; it came from her excessive relief. But it was with some consciousness of having been unjust to him that she faced him. "Is it really you?" she said. She felt shocked at the change in him; he looked years older. She read in his glance of his weariness and distress.

"I was in the cab. I saw you passing, and so got out. I called to see you, but you were not at home."

"I went out, not thinking that you would call."

"Ethel is much better," he said. "I know how glad you will be to hear. All she needs now is rest and a little stimulant. You will be surprised at the change in her."

She resented his calm acceptance of the confiding belief that she would resume her visits there. But in the quick attempt to name reasons for refusing to go, she became aware that there was nothing tangible for her mind to lay hold of. "I am very glad indeed," she said. "It was such good news that I could scarcely believe it at first. Such a wonderful improvement in the time! But of course the reason is your arrival. Her constant cry was for you—in her waking moments and in her delirium."

"The poor little girl! she has had a severe time. And she is still very weak, of course. She was asking after you. I told her I would bring you back with me."

A gladsome surprise shot through her. It was solacing to her spirit to regard her connection with them as being resumed at the child's request. She could offer no resistance, and was saved from the haunting uneasiness that mere surrender to him would have left. "Fancy her asking after me!" she said.

"Can you fancy her failing to do so?"

She looked up, but his gaze showed a simple sincerity, and not the misplaced playfulness she had feared. Repentance of her misjudgment led her to much beyond forgiveness. "When I saw her first she seemed so delirious that I thought she never recognised me. She gave no sign that she did, at any rate."

"I didn't know that. But she must have known you! Of course her recollections are hazy. She asked me where you were, and when I told her you had visited her often, she remembered at once."

"I shall be delighted to see her. Indeed I feel I am almost dying to speak to her. She was always such a loving little thing. But her recovery —it seems so wonderful!"

He smiled gently at her enthusiasm. "Still it is not so very unusual," he said. "Once the crisis is past, recovery is often very rapid. I have seen Stephens who was attending her. I like him very much."

"He was always kind and thoughtful: I like him a good deal, too. What does he think of Ethel's recovery?"

"He is very pleased about it, but laughingly ascribes it to me. He says all he had to do was to keep her alive till I came."

"He told me that she—that her life hung by a thread: that a day later might be too late. Her anxiety to see you seemed to be the only thing sustaining her."

"One feels infinitely thankful. Life is such a frail thing—the struggle seems unequal. But it is all over now. Will you come to see her to-day?"

"Yes, to-day—this afternoon. I could come now, but—" she paused for him to press her, but he seemed ignorant of the opening. To her fancy his trials had left him mentally impaired in some degree. It was as if he could accept only the simpler aspect of a question, and not go below the surface for a meaning. "No, this afternoon will be better," she ended

"You are going home now? I will walk some of the way with you. There is something else that I want to speak to you about."

Her face flushed, and she sank her eyes. She felt angry with herself in knowing he would misread such signs. He would think they were due to prudish conventional considerations of sex. They went on side by side, and she waited for him to speak, her heart beating faster as his silence continued. She became frightenedly conscious of the sharp pang that would sweep through her at his first word. She took a hurried glance and saw the cruel emotion that unnerved him.

"She, too, is ill," he said, his voice quivering. "The strain of watching so long with Ethel!"

"Not seriously ill?" she cried. "She is not in danger?"

"I cannot be sure, though I think not, from what the housekeeper tells me. But in her state any illness is serious. She bears so much—suffers so much. I do not know what to do about her. I have not seen her at all. I thought it best to come to you. Though I hate to keep you mixed up in it, and I suppose you are very wary of it, too."

"You have not seen her?" she echoed.

"She has kept to her room. I thought you knew; I thought that you had counselled her—I mean, agreed that it would be best. That is why I came to you—at least, it is partly why."

In vivid intuition she saw how, from the first, he had supposed her wholly identified with the selfish side of Alison's welfare, as against himself. She recognised that all of his defensive attitude in

her presence had been because of that, and not because of the wish in itself to keep apart from her. The cruelty she had inflicted on herself was far more present to her than any sense of injustice done to him.

Yet she found herself speaking in defence of Alison's stubbornness. It was not, she insisted, that the woman saw any advantage to herself in such seclusion, but only that she simply could not face him. But her grief at finding matters had not progressed a step beyond where she had left them aroused her compassion for him. His patience, under torture, was itself an appeal that lifted her to a determined mood. She offered to urge upon Alison the need of meeting him.

He had no course but to avail himself of her generosity. She learned that he intended to take Ethel home with him as soon as she could travel. But he felt that he could not go back without seeing her mother. He wished to know what projects she had in view, and to help her, if she would accept help from him. As to the meeting itself, he confessed that he shrank from it. But he saw it as imperative to insist; he could not part from her in this way. If he went back without seeing her, he would, he feared, always feel that he had shirked the duties of his wretched position.

CHAPTER XXVII

UNSUCCESSFULLY URGES ITS NECESSITY

HE reviewed with close attention the circumstances that had brought him to her, that put her in a position to be of help to him. Alison was appalled at the necessity of facing him, and he, in tender consideration, preferred that she should be influenced instead of forced. But would she be able to conquer Alison's reluctance? It was more than likely, since she had justice on her side. Nevertheless, she felt that in his eyes the value of her sympathy was not reducible to such a simple issue. In outward fact he faced the world alone, but in his own consciousness there was one to whom he could always appeal, to whom he had perhaps revealed more of himself than he could ever do to any other. She had a part in his life, and her chief happiness in that was in the feeling that no one but themselves knew it.

She learned from the housekeeper that Mr Hunter was out. The fact gave her a painful sense of being forsaken, and she faced the first thought of failure in her mission. The difficulties of the task she had accepted loomed up before her. What if the woman's fears proved absolutely un-

conquerable? In any case, was it likely that mere reasoning on her part could weaken a passionate determination? She could discover no reason in his absence, and was consciously on the verge of yielding to the distress she felt.

She looked in at Ethel but found she was asleep. She noted with intense gladness that in her appearance there was visible evidence of great improvement, but her weak and worn condition still commanded sympathy. She had a thought of how quickly the dead weight on her brain would be lifted were she to be told that all that was required of her was attendance on Ethel. And in that she reached the first recognition that it really rested with herself to escape from the ordeal she feared. She could tell him she was not equal to it, and he must accept her reluctance. The simplicity of that evasion resulted in lessening her fear of the task itself.

She knocked at Alison's door but received no answer. Her timidity encouraged the momentary conviction that she had left the house. "May I come in?" she called.

"O Minnie, is it you?" said a relieved voice.

The room had been darkened, and she could not see before her. She felt that she was entering a tomb. But then it was to help Alison escape from it! She reached the bedside and knelt down holding the quivering hand of the woman, who lay nervously gasping as if recovering from fear.

"What is the matter?" whispered Minnie solicitously.

"I thought you were never coming," murmured the woman.

"I did not know you were ill. I thought everything was so different, and that I must not intrude."

"It has been so long, Minnie!"

She felt a chill at her heart. Alison seemed to completely identify her presence as solely the outcome of pity for her. And even in reviewing the imperative necessity of her errand, she was woman enough to see the treason of it. "I never knew you wanted me," she said. "Why didn't you send?"

"My days for sending are over," she said tearfully. "There used to be a time—you remember? How far back it seems!"

"Not to me, Alison."

"Ah no! not to you, why should it?"

"I have pained you, dear, I did not mean to do that." She felt suddenly the joy of knowing Mr Hunter was not in the house. She could feel for Alison without a too vivid consciousness of disloyalty to him. In an indefinite way she seemed to realise that he had foreseen her position, and had gone out from consideration for her. That view demanded that she in return must not fail in what he expected from her. The duality of her position was again presented to her, but she felt encouraged in recognising that it was not in harsh contrast.

"Life is all pain, now," said the other resignedly.

"It need not be."

"Why should you say hopeful things, Minnie? It is not worth your while."

"That is cruel, Alison."

"Ah, Minnie, cruelly true!" she sighed. The hopelessness of her outlook echoed in her words.

"Ethel is better. Look what you have to be thankful for there!"

She looked up in sudden doubt of the girl. "And I am thankful!" she protested. "From the bottom of my heart! He may doubt it; you also if you can, but still—"

"Hush, Alison! No one doubts that. Be calmer, dear."

"You used to think that I wanted her to die. And perhaps I told you so. I do not remember; I was mad in those days. If I did, it was never my real self spoke."

"There is no reason to defend yourself to me," she said softly.

"No, Minnie, I know that. It is time I did by now."

"And how long have you been here?"

"An eternity, I think," she murmured in her wretchedness.

"Since I was here last?" said Minnie. She offered a suggestion synonymous with the arrival of Mr Hunter.

"Yes, since then."

"You have not been out of the room?" The question was also a modified accusation of womanly artifice.

"Minnie, I have been ill!" she cried. "I am better now, but at first I thought—I hoped—But it was not to be."

"Of course it was not," she murmured gently.

"Ah! Minnie, if it had come, and I were out of this, how much better for all—for even you."

"Alison, you must not talk so. You make it all so much harder for yourself."

"Blame me, Minnie; but tell me where it is to end?"

"Alison, you weary me!" she cried.

"Then leave me to myself."

She could admit that the woman's distress was sharp enough to make even such offence forgivable. But she was not unconscious of her generosity to Alison, and her loyalty to Mr Hunter, when she said with quiet firmness, "I will not."

"I know how wearisome I am," said the other in apology. "I wonder how you put up with me at all, Minnie."

"Because—— Well, you have no one but me."

"No one," she echoed mournfully.

Minnie stooped over her, and putting her face to the woman's said quickly: "Alison, you must consent to see him."

She started back, looking up at the girl with staring, terrified eyes; her breath came in gasps; she seemed about to succumb to the horror of what her mind saw. Minnie felt a keen sense of treason, a sharper pang than she could admit she deserved.

"Never, never, never!" Alison broke forth. "If he sent you—tell him that. Tell him I will die first. I will not be afraid this time. He thinks me a coward, but he shall see."

"Alison, you are not yourself. You must not say such things!"

"Did he send you?"

She laughed in quiet tolerance of the question, in the confidence of her ability to defend herself, but at the echo of it became aware how unfittingly out of place it was. She said firmly: "Had I known that you were refusing to meet him I would have come."

"But he asked you?"

"I don't see that it matters whether he did or not."

"He has turned even you against me!" she wailed.

"Cannot I be the friend of both?" she asked.

"No! I do not deserve a friend. And if you are here for his sake—— But I did not think to lose you so soon!"

The girl felt that her brain was reeling; her failure was so complete. And Alison seemed to have suddenly changed, to have lost her humility. She looked upon her claim to her friendship as superior to her husband's. The girl felt resentful in his name and her own.

"He wants to see you in order to settle matters finally," she said. "There is no other reason. He told me that there could be no joy in the meeting for him."

"Ah no! it would all be for me."

"Alison, how unjust you are to him," she said hotly. She felt that she had laid herself open to Alison's suspicion in such quick defence of him.

"Was he never unjust to me?" she asked.

"Ah! Alison, do you blame *him*?" cried Minnie, in surprise. She faced the woman reprovingly, and saw victory as something that was imperatively due to him.

"No, no," she answered shivering. "No one but myself."

Minnie caressed her tenderly; she felt grateful for the completeness of his acquittal. "You will not refuse to meet him," she said gently. "He looks upon it as his duty to insist."

"Minnie, you would not ask it?" she appealed
"Is it right that you should be guided by your
fears only?"

"You would not ask it?" she repeated.

"I do."

"Because he told you to?"

"Because I think it would be best."

"There is no reason for it. He can go back-
he and Ethel. I will stay here for the present
I can earn my own living. Tell him that."

"You are calmer now, Alison. You will consent?"

"Minnie, I cannot," she cried despairingly. ".
would sooner die. Think what it means for me
And you ask me—to go through that! Have I
not borne enough? My punishment is eternal.
Go to him, Minnie; speak to him, plead for me.
You will if you feel any pity for me, and I know
you do. My wretched plight deserves pity as well
as contempt. Last night I dreamed horrible
things. I woke up fancying he was in the room.
I cannot tell you how I felt. It was like—as if
my life had been shattered into a thousand pieces,
and were trying to reunite itself. The nameless
horror of it! It was everything and nothing—as
if it did not matter in the least, as if it mattered all
the world. I was dead, but could not escape from
life. It was torture! You would not ask me to
go through it again, would you?"

The girl's vivid fancy enabled her to partly con-
ceive the terrors of Alison's sufferings. Sympathy
carried her outside her calmer self. "No, I could
not," she whispered.

But the echo of her words was a rain of bullets
on her heart.

CHAPTER XXVIII

SATISFIES THE DESIRE FOR A VICTIM

IT was some days after her return to Gympie that Minnie was enabled to persuade herself that Alison's fate was a thing she was no longer actively concerned in. She had fled from Sydney, spurred by her failure to perform the part she had taken on herself. She had not dared to face him, to look upon his dismay. But remembrance of her defeat dwelt constantly with her ; she felt it with a new force that at times seemed to embody an accusation. She was not to blame, yet she could blame herself to him.

She felt an indefinite shame in having run away. Looking back it seemed to have been a mistake. Yet what else could she have done ? She had failed in helping him, though through no want of effort. It would seem as if fate had nullified her endeavours in the intention that those two should settle their own future. And she was conscious that she would have come to regard her intercourse with them as presumption did she not cling strongly to remembrance of how sincere had been his appeal for her aid.

She heard the rumour of his return, together with

Ethel, and there was for her a pang amounting to a shadowy impeachment in contemplating Alison's loneliness. But had he seen her before he came away? She reviewed the difficulties, and her conviction that he had failed even as she had done, permitted her to believe they were unconquerable.

Would he call on her? There were many reasons why he should not, and none why he should, but nevertheless she nourished the hope in her heart. He knew that she felt for him in his wretchedness, and knew too that she had done her poor best to be of use to him. But perhaps he was unwilling to renew their intimate relations. Perhaps she, in her connection with the past, was the one mortal in the world that he did not wish to see. She was able to forgive him even that threatened attitude.

It was some few days later that in opening the door to a timid knock she encountered Ethel. The child looked ill, and her face showed traces of recent tears. She looked at Minnie as if wholly doubtful of welcome, and the girl caught her up and kissed her. Her intense delight in the child gave her a sharp sense of how closely her life was identified with Alison and him. "My darling Ethel!" she murmured.

"She is not dead, Miss Turner! Muma is not dead!" cried the child in abandoned emotion. "Take me back to her, will you? She wants me! I heard her calling. And you come too; she loves you!"

She felt that the child was the victim of a mad inspiration, but she was conscious of a chill at her heart. "My dear Ethel, you are shivering!" she

said! "You poor little darling! But you must calm yourself, and tell me what is the matter."

"Muma is not dead," she wailed.

The child's mere insistence sent a shiver through her blood. She seemed to realise a third presence in the room—the spirit of the dead mother. "No, she is not, Ethel; I am sure she is not." Her emphasis was a protest against her own fears.

"Grandma said she was."

"Grandma said so! But she doesn't know, Ethel. You saw her before you left! Your grandma knows nothing at all about it. What does your dada say?"

"He said so too when I asked him. And he told me to go away. That is why I came to you, Miss Turner. Oh, take me to her! I know she is not dead! No one wants me now."

The picture of her father that the child presented struck at her heart. It could be but true then that Alison had ended it all in her own way. In the attempt to doubt that, she but faced the revelation that the woman had always had that project in her mind.

"I heard her calling me last night," said Ethel, "I woke up and heard her. If she is dead, I wish I was dead, too!"

"Hush, dear! What would become of your father if he had not you? Ethel must think of him."

"He does not love me now. He told me to go away."

"Dear Ethel, that was because of his grief."

"Will you take me back to Sydney?" she cried. "O Miss Turner do, then I will believe that she is dead! I do not love my grandma. She was cruel to muma; that is why she went away."

I told her she was glad my muma was dead, and she cried, too. But I told her that I did not believe my muma was dead. I heard her calling me last night."

"But that was fancy, Ethel. Or perhaps she was in Heaven, dear, and wished to tell you she was happy."

Ethel stared with open eyes ; a new phase was presented to her. Her unwillingness to accept it was only equalled by the difficulty of discarding it.

"You must go back now, Ethel—and be a good girl."

"I do not want to go back. No one loves me. My dada told me to go away."

"But, dear, you must remember how worried he is. He has enough to bear ; you must not try him further. You are all he has now."

"I wish I was dead with muma !"

"Ethel, I shall be angry if you talk so. Don't you love your dada ?"

"No, no, I don't." Shocked with the heinousness of the confession, she cried abandonedly.

It cost her an effort of courage to decide on taking the child home. She recoiled from intruding on him at this worst hour of his distress, and determined on accompanying her only as far as the gate. They went out hand in hand. She was stupefied by the horror of Ethel's disclosure ; her brain seemed stripped of the power to depart from the central fact of it. She was not conscious of any doubt of its truth ; she was saved the torture of uncertainty.

In approaching the house she saw Mrs Hunter on the veranda. It came suddenly upon her that

she must speak with the woman, since retreat from her would bear an altogether different aspect to retreat from her son's presence.

"I have brought Ethel back," she said.

"I was wondering where the poor child had got to. I could not find her about the house."

They stood facing one another, and their eyes met; their common sex seemed to her to include an identity of outlook on past events.

"She tells me that her mother——" she encountered a look that stopped her utterance, and she staggered back. It was not true! Ethel had been purposely deceived. In the need of relinquishing her resignation to the worst, she fronted some uncertainty of perception on surrounding issues. But she became sharply aware that her presence here was an intrusion. It looked as if she were, out of mere curiosity, seeking idle information.

"Ethel, dear, run and dress your doll; it is on the bed," said the grandmother. She watched the child with tender eyes, then turned to Minnie. "I did it for the best. Can you blame me? She was pining for her mother—making his misery keener, and mine also if that counts. And when she came to me in the night—last night that is—saying that her mother was calling her, it seemed the best thing to do. I have half regretted it since. She is so changed. If one could tell what ultimate effect it will have on her. I wish I knew if it were for the best."

The girl felt a gladsome thrill; her presence was justified in her own sight by the woman's appeal to her. But her first thought was turned to Alison. "She is well then?" she said hoarsely.

"She was recovering when Edgar left. He told me about you. I, too, thank you for all you did for him—and her."

"Poor Alison!" She was sharply conscious of the deficiency of her utterance in comparison with the demands of the situation.

"But what did Ethel say to you?"

"She said she did not believe her mother was dead. She wanted me to take her back to Sydney." She saw the need of informing the woman that Ethel had said she no longer loved her father or grandmother, and felt that she was accepting a personal responsibility in refusing to disclose so much in the mere fear of paining the woman. "I think I helped you unconsciously," she added. "I believed for the moment that Alison had ended it herself."

"She seemed much quieter. Oh, it must be for the best. She asked her father this morning before I had time to warn him, and I heard him answer, 'Dead to us, Ethel.' It looks as if I had done right."

"I think so, too. It will be better if she grows up in that belief. But then there is Alison herself! Oh, it is all so difficult! I do not know—but then it is nothing to me. I mean I have no right to intrude myself."

"I am infinitely thankful that you came. I want some one to talk to. And perhaps it will take Edgar from himself."

"Is Mr Hunter in? Do not tell him I am here; I feel that I could not face him."

"It will be best for both of you to get it over. I know he will be very glad to see you." She

knocked at her son's door, and he came out to them.

"Well, Minnie——" He corrected himself with, "Miss Turner."

In her vibrant emotion her foremost impulse was to laugh, though perhaps more at the correction than at the mistake. But his weary heart-sick glance was a check upon her. She was glad that she had a justified feminine refuge in silence.

"You see we have got back," he said.

"For pity's sake do not joke about it!" she cried hysterically. Her conscious dismay in realising that she had said more than she wished, and more than she had any right to say, summoned tears.

"Your nerves are upset, dear," said Mrs Hunter, putting an arm around her. "And Edgar's also, for that matter. He did not mean to joke about it. It is only—— Sometimes I myself feel as if I could shriek with laughter. There are moments when that seems the only vent for one's feelings."

"Oh, I did not know what I was saying," the girl wailed. "I did not mean anything. Forgive me! I do not know what is the matter with me; except that I have no right here."

Mrs Hunter took her into her own room to calm her mood. "My poor girl," she murmured, "all you have gone through has been enough to shatter any one. And one so young as you! My dear dear girl, you have done so much."

"I have done nothing," she sobbed. "Or, at any rate, it was not from any virtue in myself. But you will not understand. Do you think he will forgive me for what I said just now? I was mad. And I know I didn't mean it."

"My dear girl, do not worry about a little thing like that."

"But do you think he will?"

"I am sure he has forgiven it long ago—as soon as it was uttered. It was but the impulse of a moment; he understands that."

"You could never have said it." In realising the inane femininity of that remark, she, in protest against the depths she was sinking to, recovered to calmer consciousness and reason. "I am glad that I came," she said in the confused effort to reveal her deliverance from the rule of unreasoning impulses.

"It does me good to hear you say that. And Edgar wants rousing. He does nothing all day—scarcely anything. His life is wrecked. Will he ever recover? I ask myself that question all day long. I hoped that he would be able to centre himself in Ethel. That may come later. But she, too, is strangely altered. Oh, the hateful cruelty of it all!"

It was some identity of impulse that took them in search of Ethel. They found the child in her mother's room—the room she had slept in since her grandmother's visit, and had persisted in occupying after her own return from Sydney. On the bed they saw a doll dressed in black and lying in a cardboard box. Ethel, in half-kneeling attitude, bent over it with clasped hands.

The scene to Minnie seemed to embody some mysterious significance. It was at the impulse of the undefined feeling that she stood alone in her impression, that she unlinked her arm from Mrs Hunter's.

SATISFIES THE DESIRE FOR A VICTIM 307

"What are you doing, dear?" said the grandmother.

The child hesitated, then answered slowly: "I am playing at funerals. My dolly is dead."

"Dead, child! But you mustn't—— What a morbid fancy! Yet I don't know." She appealed to Minnie in a whisper, "If she can accept it so calmly, we must only feel grateful?"

The girl felt the shock of finding her so satisfied. It seemed as if they stood at extremes in looking down at the child. Yet her fears would not define themselves, and she realised the pitiful impotence of a mind that could but hint and not disclose.

"Will they put me in a coffin like this when I am dead?" asked Ethel.

Minnie felt the significance of that enquiry shoot through her brain like a flash. She looked up at Mrs Hunter; surely the question would awaken her to the dangerous import of the change they saw in the child!

"You are not going to die, dear. You are going to live to be a comfort to your dada," said Mrs Hunter.

"Muma is dead."

"Yes, dear, she is dead." She felt her fears revive in repeating the falsity.

"Is it nice to be dead?"

"No, Ethel, no!" Minnie broke out. She lifted the child into her arms, her hot tears falling on her cheeks. "You must not talk so, darling. You must stay with your dada; he has no one but you."

"What is that smell—something sweet?" said the grandmother. "Is it laudanum? Where did

you get it from?" She snatched at a small bottle that was on the table. "Where did you get this, Ethel?" she cried in alarm.

"I got it in dada's room," she murmured whimperingly.

"You have not taken any?" she asked quickly.

"I put some on the dolly."

Minnie's heart sprang to an excessive relief. It seemed to her that her whole fears were allayed by Ethel's simple misunderstanding of the question.

"On the dolly!" echoed Mrs Hunter. "What did you do that for? But you have not taken any yourself? you have not had it near your mouth?"

"No, grandma." Her look was an enquiry of the import of the question.

"You must not touch it, child; it belongs to your dada. It is poison."

In Minnie's blood there was a shrieking protest against the woman's disclosure. But her neglect to immediately utter it allowed her to sink to a disbelief in its necessity or importance.

"He has been using it since he returned," said Mrs Hunter to her. "He cannot sleep."

Ethel burst out into quivering sobs. "I didn't take it," she murmured cryingly, "I didn't."

"No, dear," said her grandmother. "You needn't cry, then. I am not going to say anything. Only you must not touch anything in dada's room—this most of all."

She went out of the room to return the bottle, and Ethel clung closer to Minnie. The girl could almost fancy the child was reviewing in horror an impulse that had prompted her to take some of the poison. The passionate strength with which

she clung to her seemed also to hint that she knew her impulse had been discovered. "What did you want with it, Ethel?" she asked. "Why did you put it on your dolly?"

"Because it smells—like dead things," sobbed the child.

Ethel was sent to bed early, but asked to have Minnie sit by her. The girl's thoughts were in a pure atmosphere in watching the delicate little figure, whose pallor of face was accentuated by her white nightdress. Yet she seemed to realise that the child was in such costume nearer a return to the old Ethel than she had been before.

"Is muma with the angels?" she asked musingly.

"Yes, dear, she is happy now." The lie caught at her throat; she felt as if she could not go on. She murmured at length: "So you are not to be disconsolate, Ethel, because she is not here. She would not like that. You have your dada still; you must do all you can to make his life happy. And it all depends on you, dear."

"He told me to go away."

She inwardly protested against the child's insistence on that fact, but she kept her voice on gentle tones. "But that was when he was worried, dear. You must go to him in the morning and kiss him just the same as you used to do when your muma was here. He is so troubled that he has forgotten he was harsh to his darling Ethel."

"Is he troubled because muma is in Heaven?"

"Yes, dear—because he has not got used to the loss of her."

"Muma was calling me last night. I heard her."

Minnie grew afraid of this intrusion of the child's spiritual fancy. It seemed to lead to matters that were out of her grasp, to hint at mysterious unknown forces in life. She was conscious of how weak was the interpretation she offered. "That was to tell you she was happy dear, so you must not grieve for her any more."

"But she called me just as if she wanted me."

"That was your fancy, Ethel. For of course your muma knows how much your dada need you. She would not want to take you from him."

The child's tears broke out in a vision of the deficient promises of an attractive future. "He told me to go away," she sobbed. Minnie caressed her lovingly in the hope of quietening her. But her tenderness served to break down the childish barrier of restraint. Ethel cried from her heart, "I want my muma. I want her now."

Her grief being given free course, subsided in time, and Minnie laid the exhausted figure back on the pillows. She lay quiet except for an occasional quivering sob, and holding Minnie's hand in her own, fell asleep.

The morning opened in golden promise of sunshine; the air was fresh and bracing, the sky the palest blue. Mrs Hunter stood out on the veranda feeling a welcome in the surrounding scene. It seemed as if life was to begin again for them here. She wondered less at the feeling itself, than that it should be so vivid.

Her son came out to her, looking worn and dispirited.

"You have not slept?" she questioned.

"I did, fairly well."

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